

**THE OLDEST PROFESSIONS IN REVOLUTIONARY TIMES: MADAMES,
PIMPS, AND PROSTITUTION IN MEXICO CITY, 1920-1952**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the impact of the end of state-regulated prostitution in Mexico City. It analyzes the results of debates on prostitution and the trafficking in women against the backdrop of revolutionary politics and the consolidation of state authority in Mexico in the interwar period. The League of Nations' resolutions asking for the criminalization of intermediaries, brothels, and call houses prompted global debates and actions. In the capital city prostitutes resulted to be disempowered, madams prosecuted, while authorities and pimps turned more violent towards sex workers and extorted them more often. Through the lens of gender it is argued here that the transition of power from madames to pimps played a central role in the reconfiguration of commercial sex in modern Mexico City. The most important finding of this investigation is that over time, power shifted from women involved in Mexico City's sex trade —madames and sex workers—to men —pimps, landlords, and cops.

This doctoral research contributes to debates on prostitution and labor. It highlights several attempts made by women involved in the sex trade to gain recognition as workers and to be part of the new national project. Another aim of this work is to show the importance of sites of prostitution to the social life of the city, as well as to illuminate the relationship between modernity, urbanization, commercial sex, and different cultural expressions such as literature, cinema, and music.

In order to show the complex dynamics of prostitution, this dissertation draws from a wide array of sources: images, film, court records, letters, legislation, memoirs, newspapers, and periodicals show the contested nature of the discourses that shaped legal, cultural, and social notions which ruled commercial sex during the first half of the twentieth century.

To Gabriela Cano with admiration and gratitude

To Mexico City

No amo mi Patria. Su fulgor abstracto
es inasible.

Pero (aunque suene mal) daría la vida
por diez lugares suyos, cierta gente,
puertos, bosques de pinos, fortalezas,
una ciudad deshecha, gris, mounstrosa,
varias figuras de su historia,
montañas
(y tres o cuatro ríos)

Alta traición, José Emilio Pacheco

I do not love my Homeland. Its abstract splendor
is beyond my grasp.

But (although it sounds bad) I would give my life
for ten places in it, for certain people,
seaports, pinewoods, fortresses,
a run-down city, gray, grotesque,
various figures from its history,
mountains
(and three or four rivers)

High Treason, José Emilio Pacheco

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Introduction

The Street Belongs To Those Who Work It

Krizna started working in the streets in the early 1990s. In the beginning, she felt attracted “by the atmosphere, the sparkly dresses that workmates [...] were wearing, the number of cars [drivers] that stopped to ask [for information about the service], and the moment when the girls were hired to have sex.”¹ For Krizna, a 20 year old trans woman at the time, sexual commerce represented a chance to make a living. Some of her clients were “important people, and also some men who could barely afford [the service]”. Some months later, Krizna experienced the downside of sex work: mistreatment, raids, extortion, and threats from policemen. She said: “I must confess that during that time I felt I deserved the way they treated us. I thought we had no rights, and that it was the way the government turned a blind eye and let us work in an illegal occupation.”²

In the first years of the 1990 decade a government measure forced sex workers to undergo tests for sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS every three months. If women had clean results, Mexico City’s government officials gave them a stamped card. If they tested positive for a disease, a report with their name and photograph was sent to hotels so that they would not be hired. The officials would check their cards on a daily basis: to forget the card meant the officials got more money. “Many of us began to realize we had rights and we started to protest,” Krizna affirms, “but it was useless, on the contrary, we started to be detected”; and policemen would often take them to the station, on many occasions with false testimony from witnesses who claimed sex workers robbed them.³

¹ Krizna, “Con La Ley En La Mano,” *Nexos*, September 1, 2014, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=22363>. [por el ambiente, el destello de los vestidos de todas las compañeras que trabajaban allí, la cantidad de carros que pasaban a preguntar y cuando las contrataban para tener sexo]

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. [“personas importantes y también gente que apenas traía lo justo”/ “Debo confesar que en ese tiempo me sentía merecedora del trato que nos daban. Creía que no teníamos derechos y que era una forma en que el gobierno se hacía de la vista gorda para dejarnos trabajar en un oficio ilegal”/ “Muchas de nosotras comenzamos a tener noción de nuestros derechos y comenzamos a protestar”/“pero no servía de nada, al contrario, nos comenzaron a detectar”]

Krizna and her workmates mistrusted the help offered by political parties, since they were afraid of being used at the politicians' convenience. In 1994, they joined the *Brigada Callejera de Apoyo a la Mujer "Elisa Martínez"* (Elisa Martínez Street Brigade to Support Women), a civil organization that ran legal workshops, and gave AIDS prevention and human rights talks to male and female sex workers, as well as transgender ones, like Krizna. Thus, several sex workers engaged in what Krizna calls "sidewalk policy" [política de banqueta], in other words, organization and training in legal topics and public health related issues relevant to sex workers. Autonomy was a determining factor: they would negotiate with public officials and politicians, but they would not allow them to participate in the organization. Twenty years later, one of the major achievements of the Street Brigade was gaining recognition for sex workers as "non-salaried workers" by the city government.⁴

For almost two decades, the Street Brigade petitioned Mexico City government in search of official recognition, since their activities fit the legal definition of non-salaried workers: those "who offer(s) an occasional or casual service to another person in the street without being part of an employee-employer relationship."⁵ In 2013, the government office denied the program's relevance to prostitutes, arguing that sexual commerce is regarded as an "administrative offence" [falta administrativa] if a complaint from neighbors arises. These anonymous complaints had been used on numerous occasions to extort sex workers.⁶ The government's intractability led Street Brigade to search for legal protection, so they brought a civil suit against the government requesting an

⁴ Ibid. [trabajadores no asalariados]. Judge Paula María Sánchez Cordero's February 2014 decision was the result of a series of legal proceedings that lasted several years. The regulations for Mexico City's non-salaried workers have been in effect since 1975, and their purpose is to protect the rights of numerous workers that do their jobs in the streets. Some of the occupations listed in the regulations are mariachis, shoe cleaners, magazine or lottery ticket vendors, and parking-lot guards. Those who undertake activities in similar circumstances should obey the same laws, as long as there are no "special norms governing them" [normas especiales que los rijan]. See *Reglamento Para Trabajadores No Asalariados del Distrito Federal*, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://ordenjuridicodemo.segob.gob.mx/Estatal/DISTRITO%20FEDERAL/Reglamentos/DFREG95.pdf>.

⁵ *Reglamento Para Trabajadores No Asalariados...*, <http://ordenjuridicodemo.segob.gob.mx/Estatal/DISTRITO%20FEDERAL/Reglamentos/DFREG95.pdf>. [que ofrece un servicio ocasional o casual con otra persona en la vía pública sin que exista una relación obrero-patronal]

⁶ Carlos Bauer, "Paula María García Villegas. la Juez Que Ordenó el Fin de la Hipocresía," *Revolución Tres Punto Cero*, February 12, 2014, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://revoluciontrespuntocero.com/paula-maria-garcia-villegas-la-juez-que-ordeno-el-fin-de-la-hipocresia/>.

injunction. Judge Paula Villegas Sánchez Cordero ruled to grant the petitioners cards that identified them as non-salaried workers, as she considered the Mexico City government's decision unconstitutional and a violation of human rights, such as sexual and reproductive health. This verdict offered sex workers the legal right to defend their job by the formation of trade unions, as well as the right to have access to health, housing and education services. This was the Street Brigade's biggest victory in its struggle to achieve labor recognition of sexual commerce in the city, an objective it had pursued for many years. Since 2006 the Street Brigade has participated in the Labor Day march. One of their characteristic slogans is "the street belongs to those who work it," adapted from the motto "the land belongs to those who work it," a representative phrase of revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata (1879-1919), a figure who has become a symbol of social justice over the years.⁷

The incorporation of Street Brigade members into the May Day rallies coincides with the strengthening of opinion against human trafficking at a national and international level. In Mexico, the war against drugs declared by the federal government in 2006 has led to an increase of forced work and prostitution in the hands of organized crime. National and international organizations, politicians, and feminists have discussed the topic in diverse forums, highlighting the importance of such problems. However, the fight against trafficking in women has had negative consequences for those who are engaged in sexual commerce voluntarily. Krizna claimed that "[since] federal legislators [...] presented the legal project to prevent, eradicate and punish human trafficking [there has been] repression and criminalization again, to a greater extent. The idea that sex work is like

⁷ Emiliano Zapata's ideology has been taken up by diverse groups in their fight for social recognition. The Chicano movement and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) are some of the most representative. On the transcendence of the figure of Zapata as a symbol of struggle for field workers, indigenous peoples, chicanos, and its transformation throughout history, see: Theresa Ávila, *Emiliano Zapata. Figure, Image, Symbol* (New Mexico: Latin American Institute/University of New Mexico, 2007). ["la calle es de quien la trabaja"/"la tierra es de quien la trabaja"]

human trafficking caused many workmates to be detained and imprisoned.”⁸ Police operations against human trafficking have taken place at bars, table dances, and on many streets. Some of these actions have been given widespread coverage by the media, and, thus, authorities can claim to have freed many women victims of sexual exploitation. Many sex workers and dancers who appeared before Mexico City’s Human Rights Commission have claimed that they were working by choice, and that they had been coerced into stating they were being forced into prostitution, as well as into accusing someone of trafficking.⁹ Additionally, these women have objected to authorities using condoms as evidence for crimes of human trafficking, procurement or incitement to prostitution, during raids.¹⁰ If condoms are used as evidence, clients can refuse to use them.

Nowadays in Mexico City there are two sides in a policy debate about sex work. One view holds the buying and selling of sexual services, in any form, is equal to sexual exploitation, as a denigrating practice that violates women’s rights; consequently, it should be banned and totally eradicated.¹¹ The other view holds that sexual commerce has diverse nuances, from open exploitation to an agreed exchange between adults, and that each of these transactions must be categorized and regulated. The

⁸ Krizna, “Con La Ley...,” <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=22363>. [cuando los legisladores federales [...] dieron a conocer la propuesta de ley para prevenir, erradicar y sancionar la trata de personas volvimos a tener represión y criminalización con mayor fuerza. La idea de que el trabajo sexual es igual a la trata provocó que muchas compañeras fueran detenidas y encarceladas]

⁹ Icela Lagunas, “El Falso Rescate del Table Dance,” *Reporte Indigo*, July 2, 2013, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://www.reporteindigo.com/reporte/df/el-falso-rescate-del-table-dance>.

¹⁰ Jaime Montejo, “Fiscalía de la PGJDF Violó Derecho a la Salud en el Operativo por Trata en el Bar Cadillac,” *Noti-Calle*, July 12, 2013, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://brigadaac.mayfirst.org/Fiscalia-contra-la-trata-de-personas-de-la-PGJDF-violo-derecho-a-la-salud-en-operativo-por-Trata-del-bar-Cadillac>.

¹¹ The so-called Nordic model was introduced in Switzerland in 1999 and it is currently gaining ground among those who are trying to achieve a ban on sexual commerce. This model aims to eradicate prostitution by means of the criminalization of the people who pay for sex, though not of those who sell it, apart from prohibiting procurement and brothel ownership. Norway, Iceland and Korea have adopted this model in their legislation. Nowadays, the Canadian government is taking the first steps towards its implementation. The adoption of the Nordic model has worried sex workers in Canada because, apart from punishing the customer, it forbids sexual commerce negotiations in places where there are people under 18 years old, which would make sex workers’ job difficult. Besides, it links offences related to prostitution to those connected with human trafficking. Perhaps the most important international organization supporting this model is the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), www.catinternational.org. Regarding sex workers’ protests against these measures in Canada, there are numerous articles on the Internet; for example: Kelly PFLug-Back, “Sex Workers Say New ‘Prostitution’ Bill Dangerous, Potentially Lethal,” *Toronto Media Co-Op Local Independent News*, June 5, 2014; Hilary Beaumont, “Sex Workers, Supporters Rally Against Bill-36,” *Reality Bites*, June 18, 2014; Will Campbell, “Sex Workers Take to Canada’s Streets to Protest Prostitution Legislation,” *The Globe and Mail*, Jun 15, 2014, all accessed September 3, 2014.

supporters of this idea propose that governments punish those who profit from forced prostitution; protect survivors; and recognize those who engage voluntarily in sexual commerce as workers.¹² The Street Brigade's goal is to organize in the form of a cooperative, so as to avoid procurers controlling it all, since they are usually allied with unscrupulous politicians or authorities. By publicizing prostitutes' life stories, they aim to counteract the idea that all women involved in sexual commerce are victims needing to be rescued.

Current debates over the usefulness of regulating sexual commerce go back to the second half of the nineteenth century. At that time the state established institutions with the objective of controlling prostitution in the country, and for several decades the advantages and disadvantages of this system had been debated in international forums. In Mexico, groups in favor and against took up these discussions to support their views. When I initiated this investigation, its first objective was to study the causes and consequences of the madames' loss of control of sexual commerce in Mexico City. Gradually, sources revealed the importance of the ideas concerning the traffic in women that led the government to end regulated prostitution in 1940. In that system, madames and their brothels occupied a fundamental role as the legal link between sex workers and authorities. As I made progress in the search for historical evidence in archives and libraries, the radio and internet showed numerous similarities between the recent history of sexual commerce and that of the first half of the twentieth century.

This is not a study that describes recent negotiations over sexual commerce; however, it is important to note various continuities in the configuration of the relation between prostitution and Mexico City's inhabitants. In the nineteenth century, prostitutes had to carry a booklet that guaranteed they were healthy and could work, with the aim of controlling the spread of syphilis. In the 1990s AIDS brought sex workers to the attention of authorities, as they were considered one of

¹² The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) —of which the Street Brigade is a member (*Brigada Callejera*, www.gaatw.com)— belongs to this trend.

the main vectors of infection. In the 1940s raids had been conducted to combat sexual exploitation, and in these operations, physical objects were also taken as evidence. Corruption, ill treatment, and extortion from authorities and pimps did not undergo significant changes throughout the last century. Additionally brothel keepers have sought recognition from the state as workers since the 1940s. Areas near the city center have endured as spaces for sexual commerce. Neighbors, tourists, physicians, feminists, businessmen, sex workers, and even the city itself, have been active participants in these negotiations.

This dissertation will examine the evidence left by madames and other intermediaries engaged in sexual commerce during the first half of the twentieth century in order to understand the dynamics of prostitution in Mexico City, emphasizing the importance of mediators between sex workers and authorities. Positioning these actors at the center of the discussion sheds light on three complex and entangled relationships during the first half of the twentieth century: prostitution and the state; sexual commerce and the city; and the relation between city dwellers, sexuality, gender, and revolutionary nationalism. The 1940s were a turning point in the history of commercial sex in the capital city, as in those years the state applied new regulations to brothel owners, and, in general, to those who managed the prostitution of others. Along with the enormous population increase and spatial growth of the urban landscape, the fight against procurement shaped power relations between genders, and established geographical boundaries of prostitution within the city.

This work is in dialogue with the existing literature that has shown prostitutes as agents of change and as active negotiators who constantly defied government policies. Prostitutes had diverse experiences, determined by the place the prostitutes worked and the person they worked for. Despite being affected by common rules, prostitution developed different dynamics according to the places, social classes, or influence of madames or pimps. Moreover, every group within the scope of commercial sex adapted to legislative and urban changes in a different way.

The closure of brothels as well as the demolition of one-room places in the tolerance zone affected sex workers' means of negotiation and association. Emboldened by ideas about anti-exploitation, officials ignored prostitutes who protested the shutdown of their workplaces. Authorities similarly impeded the constitution of a madames' trade union, even when revolutionary ideas encouraged the prostitutes' redemption through work. The uneven action of authorities (an aggressive campaign against brothel owners with no attention to street pimps) greatly enhanced men's domination over the administration of prostitution. This study conceives prostitution as a complex network in which dichotomies (victim-tyrant; exploited-exploiter; decency-immorality) formed the essential terms of debate but were repeatedly contested in daily life. The urban context presented scenarios in which politics, vice, corruption, morality, and popular culture blended. Some of the most famous characters of popular culture of that time were prostitutes, madames and pimps, either real or fictitious. Prostitution, beyond legal discussions, was part of the socio-cultural infrastructure that built Mexico City during the post-revolution period. The consequences, changes, and discourses taking place in the first half of the century can still be perceived in the dynamics of prostitution in the recent history of the city.

Labor is a useful lens through which to view prostitution. Although the concept of "sex work" was not used in Mexico until the 1980s, the idea of work was present in various negotiations carried out by madames and prostitutes in the 1940s. Other discourses of prostitution mattered too. At the beginning of the twentieth century the contrasting images of the virtuous versus the fallen woman were still present in the everyday life of the capital city's inhabitants. Discussions about sexual commerce in the city heard voices from different sectors giving their opinion on exploitation, masculinity, labor, sexuality, and the respectability of men and women. With the aim of showing, to the greatest extent possible, the diversity of ideas and experiences regarding prostitution in Mexico City, I widened the scope of this research. The clues to the madames' loss of influence went beyond

medical and legal discourses, and it was necessary to also understand socio-cultural interchanges in the city. Not only did brothel managers constitute a fundamental piece of the world of prostitution, but also the women working in their establishments, the officials in charge of inspecting them, and the politicians, artists, as well as the clients who visited them. All of them were part of a network that included independent and clandestine sex workers, pimps, passers-by, policemen, physicians, and the Mexican state.

While my dissertation applies labor and culture as categories for analysis, the main focus relies on gender. The abolition of regulated prostitution led to the disempowerment of women in the sex trade. Under the French System of regulation, as lawmakers called it, male doctors and policymakers inspected, classified, and criminalized female bodies. However, after abolition, prostitutes and madames lost the legal means of negotiation with authorities, as well as the protection brothels provided for them. The transition of control from madames to pimps in commercial sex in the city involved four groups of social actors: clients, regulators, neighbors, and those engaged in the sex trade. The clients were exclusively male. The other three groups were mixed-gender. In these groups, men and women of different social and professional backgrounds defended or condemned prostitution.

The complexity of gender dynamics played a central role in discussions and actions surrounding prostitution in Mexico City. For instance, while doctors quoted European feminists, they distanced themselves from feminists in Mexico, even though sometimes they shared the same views on commercial sex. The regulation of prostitution and actions against procuring mainly targeted women and disregarded men, such as hoteliers, well-known pimps and male prostitutes who worked in the same spaces as female sex workers. Some women who did not work as prostitutes also experienced changes in their daily lives as a consequence of the abrogation of regulated prostitution: they were extorted by policemen who falsely accused them of being sex workers just for walking on certain

streets. Hotel raids were also efforts directed towards the morals of women, reasoning that if they were in a hotel that rented rooms per hour and not at home, they should be considered prostitutes. This logic did not apply to their male companions. In this concert of voices and silences we find well-defined postures and moments when certain groups, like neighbors, asked for the reversal of measures against commercial sex when their daily routine was affected.

Mostly, my research focuses on the 1940s, since the laws that punished procurement were modified at the beginning of that decade. The actions taken by authorities against sites of prostitution reached an unusual peak. The end of state-regulated prostitution criminalized places and people that had been part of the state until then. The government's fight against procurement modified the habits that prostitution had developed in the capital city for almost eight decades. During the first decades of the twentieth century, prostitution was still conceived as a necessary evil, or the ruin of women. But in the 1930s, the discourse adjusted to new national and international ideas, incorporating some concepts from the League of Nations –which Mexico joined in 1931–, as well as from the new nationalistic rhetoric that emerged after the revolution. Exploitation was at the center of the discussion. The closure of brothels was a Mexican government mandate, issued in order to end regulated prostitution. It also represented an opportunity for some involved in the sex trade to seek the recognition of prostitution as labor. This negotiation failed but debates around commercial sex were used as an opening for the discussion of political corruption or about the basic principles of the Mexican Revolution. In all of those debates, sex workers played an active role by appropriating not only old stereotypes, but also new ideas, with the aim of negotiating a space and a position within the city. Sexual commerce had many facets in a city that, by then, took shape as the most important urban center in the country while becoming modern metropolis.

The authorities' conception of procurement in the 1940s transformed the scheme of sexual commerce profoundly, and it included many of the capital city inhabitants. The rapid growth and

modernization process of the capital intensified social tensions around urban space, and it incorporated new discourses, images and technology into the debates on sexual commerce. This period ends in 1952 when Ernesto P. Uruchurtu took control of the city government (he was mayor of the city until 1966). The Uruchurtu era featured urban and moralizing reforms that are worth separate study. By the early 1950s it was clear that brothels would not be established legally again, and pimps had gained ground in the control of prostitution, in the streets and even in the cinema.¹³

The choice to focus on the Mexico City for this investigation is due to its nature as a center for the country's political, social, and cultural life during the first half of the twentieth century. In a highly centralized context, Mexico City not only housed the executive, legislative and judicial powers, but also received hundreds of thousands of migrants from other parts of the country, who saw opportunities to develop that were lacking in their hometowns. Modernization projects attracted workers, and, at the same time, they promoted the growth of a middle class eager to adopt consumption attitudes, which linked the city to the big international metropolises. The capital city often served as a space for experimenting and showing the world the changes of Mexican society. The city was also one of the main arenas chosen to put the League of Nations' recommendations into practice, with the aim of stopping traffic in women. The abrogation of state-controlled sexual commerce and the closure of brothels were completed in a few cities of the country, with Mexico City being perhaps the most important, due to its size, importance, and characteristics. Using all these elements leads us to call attention to the importance of relations between sex workers and their managers. In general, this central link in the interaction between prostitutes and authorities has been treated only tangentially by historiography. The valuable research on prostitutes' agency and the way they defied government impositions on their bodies, as well as discussions about regulations

¹³ Although the golden age of this industry was about to end (it ran from approximately 1936-1957), it then contributed, significantly, to the exaltation of the good-hearted prostitute image.

or prohibition of commercial sex, have all eclipsed the importance of madames and pimps in prostitute/authority negotiations. This relationship was fundamental but not simple, and at times it was based on voluntary agreements; others, on coercion and violence. The study of these nuances contributes to the analysis of prostitution not only as an activity categorized inside or outside the law or morality, but as a socio-cultural phenomenon, closely related to the daily life of Mexico City's inhabitants.

Historiographic Approaches To Prostitution

Over the past three decades, the study of women, gender and sexuality has been positioned as one of the most important fields of historical knowledge. In parallel with this development, prostitution has proven itself to be a prolific vein of study. In 1999, historian Timothy J. Gilfoyle pointed out "few subjects have moved so dramatically from the margins to the center of historical study as prostitution."¹⁴ From the pioneering research in the 1980s to the most recent investigations the study of sexual commerce has developed around four important subjects: local and international ideas, campaigns and social movements focused on prostitution's legality status; the state, its interventions and the relation of prostitution with social and political processes that constituted national states; the cultural history of cities and their social practices; and local and global economic dynamics. The historiography of prostitution has privileged the grand urban centers, as well as the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.¹⁵

The periodization of the studies on sexual commerce is related to the convergence of particular phenomena in each country, but also to a series of transnational processes shared by all these narratives. The campaigns to control syphilis, and the acceptance or rejection of public policies that aimed at regulating prostitution are a common theme. The creation of a controlled system for

¹⁴ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, "Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity," *The American Historical Review* 104, no.1 (1999): 140.

¹⁵ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society. Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1980.

prostitution was a European idea from the nineteenth century; nevertheless, its principles were discussed and established in other continents. The two world wars stimulated diverse campaigns to protect soldiers from venereal diseases, and the military context also promoted international migration. This phenomenon not only molded the social relationships of the population within growing urban centers in different countries, it also produced constant social anxiety around women. Some of the main topics that prompted heated debates in domestic and international settings were unsupervised travel, the entrance of women into the labor market, the dangers of modernity, and the fear of women prostituting at foreign brothels. Donna Guy has documented that campaigns against what was initially called “white slavery” were connected with concern among physicians, reformers and European social organizations over women from their countries working as prostitutes in legal Latin American brothels.¹⁶

The first analyses on sexual commerce resulted from the changes in social history and women’s studies in the 1970s. Books published in the 1980s, such as Walkowitz’s or Mary Gibson’s, place women, sexuality and prostitution as legitimate subjects of historical analysis. Both researchers take up the idea that women are not silent victims subordinated to men’s orders. They show the real, though limited power that women’s organizations or prostitutes had over British and Italian governments, respectively.¹⁷ While both studies prove the importance of putting women at the center of discussion and grasp the opportunity to analyze life and activities of people who, before 1980, were left out of academic research, they are careful not to take the argument of autonomy too far. Judith Walkowitz’s perspective set the basis for future investigations by researching the parliament’s attempt to control prostitution through the Contagious Diseases Acts as a way to study

¹⁶ Donna Guy, “Medical Imperialism Gone Awry. The Campaign Against Legalized Prostitution in Latin America,” in *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead. The Troubled Meeting of Sex, Gender, Public Health, and Progress in Latin America* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 17-32.

¹⁷ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society...*, (1980); Mary Gibson, *Prostitution and the State in Italy, 1860-1915* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1999) [First edition, 1986].

gender and class relationships in the Victorian era. Both the Acts and the controversy they generated among British society allowed Walkowitz to use a limited study of prostitution as a uniquely wide aperture onto gender and class hierarchy and women's struggles within that hierarchy. Her study includes the emergence of women's movements, the consolidation of state institutions, the problems of government intervention and surveillance, as well as changes in sexual and social habits. Rather than being a topic related to vice and crime, prostitution could stand as an approach through which complex political and social relationships within a country could be explained.

Studies from the 1990s included actors, sources and subject matters that offered new interpretations about politics, economy and culture in different international contexts. Luise White's research on sexual commerce in colonial Nairobi (1900-1963) takes up the idea from previous studies that prostitution is not caused by social pathologies, moral decadence, or male domination. By means of seventy interviews with former prostitutes, White reconstructs diverse processes that show sexual commerce as an opportunity for work, economical power and autonomy. Through prostitution many women in Nairobi owned properties and managed to organize without the need of pimps. In White's study, the men who visited prostitutes are incorporated into the analysis, with the aim of leaving behind monochromatic interpretations based on exploitation or degradation. The author's main interest is to study the relation between sex, money, and the accumulation of capital, with the objective of demonstrating that commercial sex had other facets beyond domination. From White's perspective, the government's attempt to control prostitution as well as to criminalize prostitutes who did not register into the system created the necessary conditions for the appearance of pimps in Nairobi's streets.¹⁸ Gilfoyle's New York work analyses sex as consumption merchandise in the growing entertainment markets of the city. Like Luise White, Gilfoyle also includes the prostitutes' clients, and conceives brothels as spaces for men's recreation that permit the business

¹⁸ Luise White, *The Comforts of Home. Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

development of women. The geography of prostitution, as well as the cultural practices in the city, shows the transformations in New York's social structures, over a little more than a century, through commercial sex.¹⁹

In the 90's Donna Guy and Gail Hershatter studied the relationship of prostitution to popular culture. They analyzed narratives of trafficking in women and studied brothels as complex social and commercial institutions.²⁰ The modernity to which cities like Buenos Aires and Shanghai were subjected during the first half of the twentieth century created the need to control venereal diseases, the sexuality of their citizens, and the models of desirable masculinity and femininity. Stories about kidnapping and selling women revealed social anxiety about migration in Argentina, while in Shanghai policymakers disregarded the affective and economical relationships that prostitutes held with their families in their places of origin. Both investigations reveal that government attempts to control prostitution were part of bigger projects that tried to modify several aspects in political and sexual spheres. Hershatter argues that the campaigns against prostitution symbolized, for the communist government, the emergence of China as a healthy, strong and modern nation. The construction of a "new" woman without a shameful past was connected with the new government wanting to leave China's past behind. For its part, Juan Domingo Perón's government in Argentina made use of regulated prostitution with the aim of *saving* men from homosexuality and strengthening working organizations, mainly masculine. Cultural pastimes such as tango and soccer worried the Peronist government. Tango lyrics showed male emotional weakness while, attracted by soccer, men did not search for the company of women as they had done before. In these and in other cities

¹⁹ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros. New York City, Prostitution and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York/London: WW Norton & Company, 1992).

²⁰ Donna Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires. Prostitution, Family and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

governments tried to define, based on sexual behavior considered acceptable, the kind of men, women, and families that should be part of the new national projects.

One of the main conclusions drawn from the first twenty years of studies on the history of prostitution is that women engaged in sexual commerce were often treated as criminals, even in places and times when prostitution was legal. Historiography from the first decade of the twenty-first century looks at urban history as well as the history of social practices in greater detail. Another common topic is the study of social organizations that attempted to regulate sexual commerce, as well as the transnational debates in which they participated. Some investigations look into the wide variety of institutions that tried to transform prostitutes into *virtuous* women, as well as the women's organizations that supported this cause. In these books, the figure of the client as someone who should be controlled by the state stands out, as does the heterogeneity of groups inside prostitution circles and among reformers. Through this perspective, authors show that the purity and hygiene movements that surrounded sexual commerce had wider social objectives, and established an intense interchange between international networks of social reformers.²¹

The complexity and disagreements, not only between those who tried to regulate prostitution, but also between those who lived it, are topics that bear special relevance in the light of big city modernization and urbanization. Christian Henriot studied the place occupied by prostitution in Shanghai's public spaces, and revealed the impact of migration on one of China's major cities.²² Judith Kelleher Schafer analyzed existing violence patterns around women involved in commercial sex, not only from their clients, but also among themselves. Kelleher also includes real state owners (who rented their properties as brothels in New Orleans) as active figures who resisted government

²¹ Paula Bartley, *Prostitution, Prevention and Reform in England, 1860-1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); David J. Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene. Women, Prostitution and the "American Plan," 1900-1930* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002); Thomas C. Mackey, *Pursuing Johns. Criminal Law Reform, Defending Character, and New York City Committee of Fourteen, 1920-1930* (Columbus: The Ohio University Press, 2005).

²² Christian Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai. A Social History, 1849-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

efforts to eradicate prostitution.²³ Elizabeth Alice Clement chooses New York in the first half of the twentieth century to study the interactions between courtship, treating, and prostitution, examining the complex concept of respectability among working-class women who forged their sexual identity in those years. Clement shows —by studying the interaction between race, ethnicity, gender and class— that young female New Yorkers allowed themselves to obtain material benefits in exchange for sex, without losing the notion of respectability that dominated their different cultures.²⁴

Recent histories of sexual commerce have consolidated the idea that prostitution is part of broad processes, in which men and women from different social sectors participate. Diverse interpretations of the buying and selling of sexual services have been useful to explain the intricate relations between politics, sexuality, culture, and society in the big cities. Many of the elements that have been studied since the 80s offer new information when examined by different analytical categories. Some of the new publications' approaches are based on the need to control prostitution in the context of national building, to explain how the state interacted with its citizens and vice versa. The incorporation of actors, time periods, or categories of analysis that had not been explored before provides explanations about matters that go beyond control and resistance. Contexts that at first sight could seem dissimilar are seen as part of global phenomena that affected the elites making the political decisions, as well as the working and middle classes.

Some female researchers have explained topics such as democracy, the advancements of Berlin women's rights, the opening of Japan to global trade, or the urban transformations of the Cuban capital on its way from being a colony to a republic, by taking prostitution as the centerpiece of analysis.²⁵ The diversity of meanings ascribed to prostitution or prostitutes, and their influence on

²³ Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women. Illegal Sex in Antebellum Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009).

²⁴ Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale. Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

²⁵ Julia Ross, *Weimar Through the Lens of Gender. Prostitution Reform, Woman's Emancipation, and German Democracy* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010); Bill Mihalopoulos, *Sex in Japan's Globalization, 1870-1930* (London:

cultural production or the entertainment industry, constitute one of the recent approaches. Jill Suzanne Smith, Anne Marie Kooistra and Christiana Schettini have taken an interest in migration, work, and the influence of cities on changing sexual norms. During the first half of the twentieth century the urbanization and growth of nightlife gave way to representations of prostitution in the visual and popular culture that modeled ambiguous moral conceptions. These ideas, just like the renegotiation of erotic conduct in the cities, had an influence on ideological conceptions about women's work in different markets, particularly the entertainment sector. In their works, the authors deal with the plurality of sexual identities that women embodied in urban spaces, as well as on the many occasions in which various social groups associated such identities with prostitution. Some of the new subjects for study in the framework of sexual commerce are single women, widows, divorcees, those with children outside marriage, and lesbians. The social and working experiences of nightclub and cabaret artists were determined by ideas concerning work, morality, and prostitution, yet at the same time, cities were conceived as spaces of freedom and corruption. The narratives about trafficking in women had an influence on working relationships of European young female artists who traveled to get jobs in Argentina or Brazil, since the men who hired them were sometimes labeled as suspects for their exploitation in sexual commerce.²⁶

Over three decades of analysis on the history of prostitution have connected those 1980s studies and recent investigations. The subject matters and analytical categories that led the way are still an important part of recent analyses, but the challenges have changed. Women and sexuality are now fundamental cornerstones of historical work. Nowadays, many of the studies on sexual commerce

Pickering & Chatto, 2011); Julia Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens, Commercial Sex in London, 1885-1969* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); Tiffany A. Sippial, *Prostitution, Modernity, and the Making of the Cuban Republic, 1840-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Elizabeth J. Remick, *Regulating Prostitution in China. Gender and Local State Building, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

²⁶ Christiana Schettini, "South American Tours: Work Relations in the Entertainment Market in South America," *ISRH*, 57 (2012), 129-160; Jill Suzanne Smith, *Berlin Coquette. Prostitution and the New German Woman, 1890-1933* (Ithaca: Signale, 2013); AnneMarie Kooistra, "The Harlot City? Prostitution in Hollywood, 1920-1940," *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014), 65-83.

try to integrate men and women with different characteristics in shared historical contexts. The goal is to detail the variety of experiences, ideas and meanings that determined juridical, social, cultural, and sexual changes as part of a local and global dialogue. My dissertation is part of such a historiographical trend. The emphasis laid on sexual commerce management as a central aspect of my analysis shows part of the complexity of the changes taking place in Mexico City from the perspective of those who entered into negotiations with authorities, and managed sex workers' earnings. Like in many of the works described above, my dissertation examines the different levels of autonomy, coercion, and violence, taking into account the role of prostitution in the construction of national states, migration, and diplomatic recognition in the international arena.

As for the historiography of prostitution in Mexico, most of the studies have focused on the second half of the nineteenth century. The first chapter, for example, draws on the knowledge generated around regulated prostitution. Fernanda Nuñez Becerra's work —among others— has been fundamental to understanding the ideological and practical foundations of prostitution in the Mexican context. Regarding the twentieth century, there are researchers who have included prostitution as part of their analysis, but mainly incidentally, in the studies about the history of criminality, art or nightlife.²⁷

Two authors have studied sexual commerce in the first decades of the twentieth century: Cristina Rivera Garza and Katherine E. Bliss. Both analyze prostitution and its relation with the state. Rivera Garza focuses on the study of the body and public health, whereas Bliss puts greater

²⁷ Fernanda Núñez Becerra, *La Prostitución y su Represión en la Ciudad de México (Siglo XIX). Prácticas y Representaciones* (Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2009). See also, Ixchel Delgado Jordá, "Mujeres Públicas bajo el Imperio: La Prostitución en la Ciudad de México durante el Imperio de Maximiliano (1864-1867)" (MA thesis, El Colegio de Michoacán, 1998); Rafael Sagredo, *María Villa (a) La Chiquita. Un Parásito Social del Porfiriato* (México: Cal y Arena, 1996); Pablo Picatto, "'El Chalequero' or the Mexican Jack the Ripper: The Meanings of Sexual Violence in Turn-of-the Century Mexico City," *Hispanic Historical American Review* 81, no. 3-4 (2001), 623-651; Sophia Koutsoyannis, "Immoral but Profitable: the Social and Cultural Life of Cabarets in Mexico City (1920-1965)" (PhD diss. York University, 2010); Carlos Medina Caracheo, "El Club de Medianoche Waikiki. Un Cabaret de Época en la Ciudad de México" (MA thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2010); Adriana Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition. Women, Gender, and Representation in Mexican Art*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Julia Tuñón, *Mujeres de Luz y Sombra en el Cine Mexicano. La Representación de Una Imagen*, (Mexico, El Colegio de México/Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1998).

emphasis on the revolutionary context, moral reforms, and urbanization.²⁸ In particular, the basis set by Bliss served as a guide and motivation for some of the most important questions I considered when beginning this project. The control of venereal diseases, the relationship between sex workers and the state, the appropriation of nationalistic language, and the different forms of everyday resistance are the most important lines of analysis I took up from Bliss's book.

Bliss proves that, in spite of the major social changes prompted by the revolution, the state failed in including women, particularly prostitutes, as part of the new national project. The revolutionary family gave shelter to traditionally marginal actors, and produced new politically active participants that took on the state's language in their quest for social justice. By focusing on the state's attempts to eradicate prostitution, Bliss demonstrates that this project failed mainly because it did not address men's responsibility in commercial sex transactions, nor did it take into account prostitutes as political subjects.

My analysis sides with Bliss's perspective, however it differs from some of her conclusions, above all from conclusions related to brothel closures or the use of prostitutes' accusations of procurement against pimps. She mainly attributes brothels' closing down to the disloyal competition of both cabarets and clandestine prostitution that flourished after the revolution. Bliss focuses on the first three decades of the twentieth century, mainly the 1920s and 1930s. In light of new primary sources, my research shows that by the 1940s madames and prostitutes made attempts to reverse the authorities' ending of state-sponsored prostitution, which had caused brothel-closing and an aggressive campaign against procuring mainly targeting madames. Such major changes affected

²⁸ Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions. Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); Cristina Rivera Garza, "The Criminalization of the Syphilitic Body: Prostitutes, Health Crimes, and Society in Mexico City, 1867-1930," in *Crime and Punishment in Latin America: Law and Society since Late Colonial Times*, ed. Ricardo D. Salvatore, Carlos Aguirre, and Gilbert M. Joseph (Durham: Durham University Press, 2001), 147-180. See also her PhD dissertation "The Masters of the Streets. Bodies, Power, and Modernity in Mexico, 1867-1930" (University of Houston, 1995).

women –madames, brothel prostitutes, streetwalkers– more than men involved in the sex trade, including pimps, clients, hoteliers, and cops.

In regards to prostitutes' accusations against pimps, Bliss notes that women used judicial means to vent their anger against their partners, but dropping the charges when authorities moved towards action. By studying several court cases from 1946 to 1952, as well as the social and cultural context of pimps and streetwalkers, my dissertation shows that violence against women played a crucial role not only in their working relationship, but also in the relevant courts, making it difficult for women not only to sustain a case, but to actually get a verdict in their favor.

Primary Sources

When I started this research, studies on Mexican prostitution had already traced some routes for analysis in Mexico City's archives and libraries. Documentary resources of the *Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Salud*, the *Archivo General de la Nación*, and the *Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México* contain details on persons and institutions in the era of regulated prostitution. In some of the sources, madames appeared on numerous occasions, while pimps managed to avoid registration. With the help and guidance of staff from the *Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México*, I decided that the way to find evidence relating to men and women who worked in the administration of sexual commerce was to track them through a common link: procurement. The personal files of people arrested and prosecuted for this crime go back to 1934. These documents would become the guide that would set the course of this investigation. Three patterns began to emerge as progress was made on the reading and on the entries of the files: first, from 1934 to 1939 authorities prosecuted 71 people, whereas 138 accused were presented before the judge in 1940 alone. Changes to Article 207 of the Penal Code began to be mentioned in the documents. Secondly, in the early 1940s, almost all those detained were women (for example, out of the 138 accused mentioned above, 101 were women), while the majority of detained men were brothel or call house employees. And thirdly,

from 1946 on, the balance of gender began to tip the other way: male arrests climbed sharply, up to the early 1950s, when around 98% of the people arrested were men.

However, the files were incomplete, sometimes containing only the judge's resolution, and other times detailing only important extracts from the case. Some complete files were located at the *Archivo General de la Nación*. But other sources were required to shed light on the changes surrounding gender in the raids detailed in judicial files. The press became an ideal vehicle for a better understanding of the transformations that prostitution was going through in the city. Newspapers dedicated many pages to describing the group arrests conducted by police, and at the same time, they mentioned the new decrees and described the protection resources that owners and women in charge of brothels and assignation houses were using. Negotiations in legal and nationalistic terms generated positive and negative opinions, as did the attempt to form a trade union with the initial approval of the Ministry of Labor. To complement many of these stories it was necessary to return to the archives: government decrees, as well as letters and telegrams to presidents (all safeguarded by the *Archivo General de la Nación*) constituted essential pieces of this jigsaw puzzle. It was also necessary to reanalyze the discourses on regulated prostitution, and to know what led to its end. The press and the documents repeated the theme of exploitation as a centerpiece of the fight by the state against procurement. A detailed examination of the debates held between physicians and the officials in charge of public policies from the nineteenth century to the 1940s gradually revealed a series of important changes. The most intriguing was the use of feminist elements by several physicians; in fact, the direct mention of European feminists to validate their stances, even though the doctors did not actually identify as feminist sympathizers. In the twentieth century, these men's arguments were clearly influenced by international debates, although filtered through a nationalistic and revolutionary rhetoric. It was thus necessary to go into the history of the relation between Mexico and the League of Nations in depth, as well as the discussions generated between them.

The differences between legal cases before and after 1946 made obvious the change of gender in the administration of sexual commerce. While the women taken before the judge during the first years had been accused by policemen or undercover agents, those men who did not work in brothels or call houses were directly accused by the women affected. These cases were presented together with complaints of beating, threats or injuries. According to court statements, the money that pimps obtained from women was spent, frequently, on clothes, shoes and entertainment. Magazines and movies of the time portrayed the cultural elements with which these men and women mixed, and also showed real and fictitious characters that were present in the popular culture of the city. Both archival materials and popular culture sources —from music, poetry, novels, photography and paintings— helped to compose and portray, broadly, Mexico City’s nightlife as well as the variety of sexual commerce offered in its streets. The memoirs of a pimp of that time —published under the pseudonym of Nick Trevi around 1970— stand out among these documents. Little by little, from these sources emerged social and cultural codes that ruled the city inhabitants and their contact with prostitution. Spaces were distinguished as one of the most important differences in the social, gender and power dynamics between the men and women in charge of sexual commerce: while madames dealt with prostitution in closed spaces, the influence of pimps took over the streets. The decisions of authorities over each of the places where sexual commerce was carried out had different criteria, and followed legislative, urban and moral changes. Maps, together with memoirs, and chronicles about the city by Salvador Novo and Carlos Monsiváis, complemented information from the press and archives to enhance understanding of the causes and consequences of transformations inside the geography of sexual commerce.

The variety of the sources used for this investigation pointed beyond the study of the relationship between madames, pimps, sex workers and the Mexican state. Such interactions are the centerpiece of this research; however, more than conceiving them as linear negotiations, restricted to

debates and laws, they are presented here as fundamental components of urban life during the first half of the twentieth century. The collection of voices coming from archives and libraries show that the approval of, as well as the resistance to, the end of regulated prostitution took place in different arenas. The consequences not only affected several key actors, but also affected spaces and socio-cultural dynamics including a good part of the city's inhabitants.

About concepts

This dissertation, in part, analyzes discourses. Prostitution in Mexico and in the rest of the world is not an immutable phenomenon, solely contained in rules devoted to banning or regulating sex trade. My dissertation's analysis is in debt to post-structuralism and how it is being applied to feminist studies and research on the history of women. As Joan Scott pointed out, this theoretical perspective provides different elements that clarify and have allowed analysis of "constructions of meaning and relationships of power that called unitary, universal categories into question and historicized concepts otherwise treated as natural (such as men/woman) or absolute."²⁹ Discursive transformations reveal the mechanisms through which power is constructed and the way it operates over time. Post-structuralist theory takes the concept of discourse from the Foucauldian perspective, conceived not as "a language or a text but a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements terms, categories, and beliefs." Therefore, discourses' construction and different meanings are conceptualized as resistance mechanisms and as reflections of power structures. In this dynamic, some discourses are marginalized, silenced, or absorbed by the prevailing context.³⁰

While working on this project there were discourses that intermingled on the concept of prostitution: *procurement* and *trafficking*, both were broadly discussed at the League of Nations. The members of this international organization wanted to specifically define a criminal offence that

²⁹ Joan W. Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: or, The Uses of Poststructuralist Theory For Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 14:1 (1988), 34.

³⁰ Joan W. Scott, "Deconstructing Equality...", 34-37; see also Scott's oft-quoted article: "Gender: A Useful Category For Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91:5 (1986), 1053-1075.

included the activities of intermediaries in prostitution, with the purpose of punishing them. However, this idea did not succeed due to the fact that *procurement* (obtaining the services of a prostitute for another person) and *pimping* (controlling, protecting, and living on the earnings of a prostitute) were terms that were classified as a single crime in different countries.³¹ Such was the case in Mexico, where the word *lenocinio* encompasses both actions. Owing to the lack of an exact translation and the fusion of both terms in the language of authorities and city inhabitants, here *procurement* and *pimping* are employed as equivalent terms. Another term that was difficult to translate was *accesorias*. The 1927 League of Nations report described them as “one-room huts which one or two women operate.”³² Nowadays, in Mexico, the word has lost its prostitution-related meaning but it is still used to describe commercial units on the ground floor of a building, usually facing the street. Some of the photographic evidence of the old tolerance zone, coming from Mexican or foreign artists, provides several images of how *accesorias* looked. In the image below, taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson on his visit to Mexico in the 1930s, a prostitute is waiting for clients behind an *accesoria's* door. A 1921 law aimed to reduce the visual discomfort sex workers caused their neighbors; authorities requested the installation of windows through which prostitutes could negotiate with their costumers. However, as will be noticed in Chapter 2, some women continued to await clients outside their doors. Due to the lack of an accurate translation, I have decided to maintain the word in Spanish.

³¹ Magaly Rodríguez García, “The League of Nations and the Moral Recruitment of Women,” *ISRH* 57 (2012) Special Issue, 113, 97-128.

³² League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children. Part Two* (Geneva: Publications of the League of Nations, 1927), 119.



Figure 1. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Calle Cuauhtemotzín*, 1934.

The discourses on trafficking in women had a direct influence on actions as well as debates on prostitution. In the 1910s to 1920s the League of Nations conceptualized trafficking as the migration of European women under the vigilant eyes of one or several men, with the objective of prostitution at brothels in other countries. In Mexico several voices spoke of trafficking or traffickers to warn young women about the dangers of commercial sex in general. My research conceives prostitution as labor without setting aside its stigma (i.e. this dissertation's use of the term *sex worker* not as an anachronism, but as part of this approach).³³ Despite the continuous amalgamation of prostitution/traffic in diverse spheres, trafficking was mostly related to international migration, and included a transnational network of people in charge of entrapping, retaining, transporting, and watching women. Throughout my analysis trafficking in women is used as a discursive element that

³³ Sex work is a concept that encompasses other practices such as stripping, phone sex, erotic massage, escort services, and erotic dancing, massage, or filmmaking. In this case I will use sex work to refer only to prostitution, that is, the exchange of money for sexual intercourse.

triggered legal and social transformations. The dynamics between foreign prostitutes, madames, and pimps open the door to future discussions. On this occasion, foreigners are presented as a central element of the discourses with which madames tried to achieve their incorporation into the nation.

The last point, it should be clarified, is related to the ideology of race-mixing (*mestizaje*) and the concept of race in Mexico. Simultaneously, *mestizaje* refers to a racial category and is one of the key components of Mexican nationalism in the twentieth century. Since the early nineteenth century, cultural elites have sought the unification of the country's inhabitants. In the first decades of the twentieth century the national project equated race mixing with being Mexican (*mexicanidad*). This myth is based on the idea that all Mexicans are the product of the blend between indigenous people and the Spanish. Widely disseminated as part of the socio-cultural policies of the revolutionary state, this inclusive rhetoric denied the racial plurality within the country for years.³⁴ The sources used here constitute a reflection of this project: race is not an issue for discussion in the legal, civil, social or cultural documents consulted. According to the prevailing rhetoric, the sources describe men and women who are *Mexican*. In this dynamic, ethnic tensions in the scope of prostitution had strong nationalistic overtones and centered on the differentiation between Mexicans and foreigners.

At the time the boundaries of this study set limits, they also come up as questions that give way to other investigations. The end of regulated prostitution in other parts of the national territory; the particular characteristics of border cities, sexual commerce in rural contexts; or trafficking in women in the country—in its narrative as well as in its de facto dimension—, will all contribute to the understanding of the complexity of sexual commerce in Mexico's modern history.

³⁴ Some of the most outstanding intellectuals that promoted the ideology of mestizaje as part of the nation project were Antonio Caso, José Vasconcelos, and Samuel Ramos. The following works are some of their most representative texts on this topic: Samuel Ramos, *El Perfil del Hombre y la Cultura en México* (1934); Antonio Caso, *El Problema de México y la Ideología Nacional* (1924); José Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cósmica* (1925).

Chapter Outline

In Mexico City before 1952, most prostitutes were women. But to be able to understand commercial sex in a wider dimension, testimonies of men have been included here as well as those of the women engaged either in the discourse or the practice of sexual commerce. This analysis relies on the premise that the social roles of men and women are constructed in a reciprocal way. It would be impossible to study any of them in isolation. This dissertation, besides, conceives these relationships to be in constant movement, under the influence not only of one or the other gender, but also of the social classes, spaces and laws that surrounded them. These elements, however, were not surrounded by unbreakable borders. Men and women of different social classes or ideologies conversed with one another in common spaces, sometimes as collaborators, other times as antagonists. With the idea of offering a broader —though not exhaustive— picture of Mexico City from the perspective of commercial sex, this dissertation has been divided into four chapters. The starting point is the medical and legal perspectives around prostitution. The other three larger themes included are: the city and its spaces; the different self-defense strategies used by prostitutes and madames; and the growing power of pimps in Mexico City.

The first chapter covers roughly 80 years. It starts with the Second Empire (1863-1867) and the establishment of the French System —or the system of regulated prostitution— and ends with the dismantling of this ordinance in 1940. These decisions were surrounded by a changing historical context that goes from Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship (1876-1911) to the outbreak of the 1910 Revolution and the consolidation of the state as a product of this conflict. During those years, physicians, legislators, and feminists held discussions about prostitution. In this chapter I analyze these discourses, explain the concepts through which sexual commerce was described, as well as the medical, moral and legal values that shaped different perspectives upon the topic. Apart from explaining the French System's function and its deficiencies in the city, this chapter proves that the

defining changes around prostitution are tied to international debates and events like World War II, the League of Nations' fight against trafficking, and Mexico's search for international recognition. In the years after the armed struggle, the government that emerged out of the revolution started a period of consolidation and registered items on its agenda that had been ignored in the past. As for prostitution, this hinged on the obedience of guidelines dictated by the League of Nations. The suppression of brothels was one of the measures imposed by this international organization since the beginning of the century. The Mexican government commenced actions against brothels in 1940, radically changing the stance that it had held in past decades. In this chapter the mechanisms used by madames and sex workers to resist registration procedures, medical inspections, and legal sanctions are also analyzed. Many of the strategies were taken up again when the government decreed the end of this system. Although many sex workers disagreed with the basis of regulated prostitution —particularly the confinement in hospital— the possibility of working in brothels granted them certain protection, which they lost when this practice was dismantled.

The second chapter contains an analysis of the places that were targeted in the laws that regulated prostitution: the Morelos Hospital, the tolerance zone, brothels, and hotels. Apart from showing the intimate connection between the sites themselves and the social and cultural life of the city, this chapter deals with the variety of experiences that men and women could have within sexual commerce. From the perspectives of madames, customers, sex workers, authorities or physicians, each of these spaces was regarded as an arena for regulation, resistance, and negotiation of legal, spatial, sexual and gender issues. Prostitution, as a visible and public activity, prompted moral, urban and judicial discussions that tried to achieve the regulation of the city's growth, as well as of its inhabitants' sexual behavior. The analysis of all these places relies on the premise that the government regulated all of them in different ways. This chapter demonstrates that the fight against procurement was centered on places and not people, although the latter were inevitably affected.

Due to the fact that brothels were considered the cornerstone of regulated prostitution, the government turned them into the main target of its actions. This decision, as well as the rapid urban growth, altered the way in which the inhabitants related to sexual commerce. The withdrawal of brothels towards secrecy and illegality is explained, as is the survival of other spaces, by studying the transformations of the scenarios of prostitution. Part of this analysis is related to the changes in internal dynamics, the police raids, and the elements of legal responsibility. The flexible frontiers between what was considered legal and what was not were key for the comprehension of the particular ways in which social actors sought to defend or attack each of the places for commercial sex. Corruption, legal tricks, and discourses on public wellbeing were used for the convenience of diverse groups. By comparing brothels and the tolerance zone or hotels, it can be inferred that the government's decision to close brothels in order to combat exploitation affected sex workers and madames. At the same time, the lack of protection for sex workers saw increases in extortion, violence, corruption, and the influence of men in the control of street prostitution.

The strategies used by sex workers and madames to defend themselves are the main topic of chapter 3. The study of their maneuvers reveals that the criminalization of procurement did not allow the association of brothel owners as workers. Independent prostitutes from the tolerance zone fared equally badly. After the demolition of the one-piece rooms they worked in, authorities did not offer them any alternative to live or work, despite their protests and their search for legal protection. These women tried to become part of the state and enjoy the new benefits it offered by using the rhetoric of the revolutionary government and the legal strategies it provided. The consolidation of the new government was based on the support of groups that had been ignored during the dictatorship period, and on the creation of new social codes. Country people and workers organized around the new national project through confederations and trade unions. The main goal of this chapter is to analyze how the madames and prostitutes appropriated and applied legal and

nationalistic arguments in hope of integrating into the nation, avoiding criminalization, and continuing to work. This is why they used legal methods that had worked for them before 1940. In letters, legal resources and complaints, these women used xenophobic expressions in accordance with ideas which the government had employed. In this chapter, the analysis of social class plays a prominent role. Prostitutes from the tolerance zone as well as madames from the most expensive brothels used these tactics. However, high-class madames were able to negotiate their relationships with politicians, and with the support of these men they tried to organize themselves into a trade union. This chapter shows that the negative results of these strategies closed several doors to labor organization inside brothels. At the same time, moral arguments about public benefit also brought adverse results for independent prostitutes, in spite of the fact that prostitution was not an activity punished by the law.

The fourth and last chapter studies how pimps came to dominate sexual commerce. The first part of the analysis describes urban modernity and migration as determining factors in the development of a particular type of pimp, drawing from images circulating in movies and magazines. By contrasting stereotypes of dominant masculinities of the time, this chapter holds the view that being a pimp was a very attractive lifestyle for many of the men who arrived in the city, due to the social and financial earnings it yielded. To achieve a full grasp of the role these men had in the world of prostitution in the city, this chapter presents the principal characteristics of the relationships established between pimps and prostitutes. The use of coercion, threats, and physical violence are distinctive marks of the bonds that kept them together. Authorities paid little attention to the legal punishment for pimps, despite the fact that this relationship could be defined as one of exploitation. Authorities did not use the crime of procurement to pursue pimps in the streets, and, sometimes, judges showed much leniency to them. One of the central ideas of this analysis is that, even though

sex workers accused pimps of procurement, fear or the lack of action from authorities allowed pimps to receive lax punishment and continue operating.

Chapter I

Regulation against Abolitionism: Debates over Prostitution, Morality, and Public Health (1864-1940)

Graciela Olmos, *La Bandida*, one of the most well-known characters in twentieth century Mexican popular culture, died in 1962 due to diabetes, cirrhosis, and other complications. For decades, Olmos owned the most famous brothel in the city. Politicians, sportsmen, musicians, artists, businessmen, and intellectuals visited her house as an obligatory stop among Mexico City's nightlife. When she died, brothels had been banned from the city for more than two decades; however, she managed to survive the campaign against brothel-keeping that city authorities carried out in the 1940s. Olmos was arrested a couple of times, but it seems her business was not affected. Thanks to her ability and connections with important men, her brothel continued operating until her death. *La Bandida* was not only the best-known madame of Mexican history, but also the composer of some emblematic Mexican songs. *El Siete Leguas* (Seven Leagues) a song about revolutionary leader Francisco Villa and his horse was perhaps the most popular. Several musicians that would become cultural icons started their careers at her house, and politicians discussed their futures and plans there.

Eduardo Muñuzuri, a journalist, attempted to write Olmos's memoirs two years before her death. Due to *La Bandida's* illnesses, and sometimes her lack of interest, the interviews were complicated to conduct. On one occasion, when Muñuzuri struggled with some distractions in the *bordello*, he tried to pick up the conversation with Olmos, saying: "Mexican history during the revolutionary age has been made in or has passed by your house; that's why it is extremely interesting [...] to reconstruct and write about the hidden side of political figures through your memories."¹ This chapter shares Muñuzuri's goal to document prostitution and politics during the

¹Eduardo Muñuzuri, *Memorias de la Bandida* (Mexico: Costa Amic, 1965), 31. [la historia de México en la época

revolutionary years. In contrast to him, my emphasis is on brothel-keepers and sex workers, and I will widen my study to include other madames of the sex trade during the first part of the twentieth century. Graciela Olmos is, without a doubt, a legend. However, her myth is part of the history of the administration of commercial sex, in which some other women took part. Her brothel's survival is the result of extensive negotiations about prostitution after the revolution.

The legal changes in commercial sex by the post-revolutionary governments during the decades of 1930 and 1940 prompted a vigorous campaign against brothel-keeping, leading to the gradual disappearance of legalized brothels and madames from the capital city landscape. Crackdowns against brothel-keepers in Mexico City were the immediate result of the victory of those who favored the abolition of prostitution. This long battle, which took place over several decades across Mexico, had its main arena in the metropolis. During the process of social and political reconstruction that started in the 1920s, Mexico City became home to new revolutionary administrations and experienced cultural changes prompted by urbanization, population centralization, modernization, and the development of new industries. These transformations revealed new patterns in the political, social, and gender power relationships in the post-revolutionary era, which can be analyzed through the lens of sexual commerce.

Throughout this chapter I will explain the foundations of the state-regulated system and its history in Mexico. By examining the social, political, and ideological changes related to prostitution it will be shown that the criminalization of brothels is closely related to the consolidation of the Mexican state in the twentieth century. The revolutionary rhetoric and the mechanisms of interaction proposed by the state played a central role in the negotiations concerning commercial sex. After the revolution, different social actors had their own interpretations about the position the new government should take on prostitution. Here I will examine the main debates about sexual

revolucionaria, se ha hecho o ha pasado por su casa; por eso es que resulta enormemente interesante [...] reconstruir y escribir esa faz oculta de las figuras políticas a través de sus recuerdos]

commerce in order to show the conjunction of circumstances that created the conditions for the elimination of state-sponsored prostitution in Mexico City. For nine decades the core argument remained pretty much the same: it was necessary to contain the spread of venereal and social diseases for the sake of order and morality. This chapter argues that in the twentieth century international movements such as feminism and the struggle against white slavery, in the context of World War II, influenced politicians, doctors, and bureaucrats who were against regulation of prostitution in Mexico. During the 1920s and 1930s human trafficking and exploitation gradually replaced the containment of venereal disease in the discussions about sex trade. Conversely, the rhetoric and political needs of the state sought to create a local discourse out of elements from the international debates in order to portray the fight against vice as a revolutionary act.

This chapter is divided in five sections. The first two explore ideas about prostitution and its organization at the end of the nineteenth century. Mainly I will explain doctor's perceptions of commercial sex, due to the importance these men had in the planning of public health policies. The third section examines the first legislative changes to prostitution after the revolution, and its main causes. The redemption of sex workers through work is one of the main ideas that began to gain terrain at the turn of the century. The fourth section will explore the national and international discussions that led to the end of state-regulated prostitution, particularly, human trafficking discourses that criminalized brothel-keepers and intermediaries in the prostitution business. The last section focuses on male prostitution. Men dedicated to the sex trade do not appear in major discussions about the topic. Male prostitutes were not registered as sex workers nor did they have to attend medical check-ups. Usually when policymakers thought about men's involvement in the sex trade, their attention was directed to them as clients or pimps. There were very few male owners of brothels and most of the legislation was directed towards women whether as madames or sex workers. By exploring men I want to draw attention to the complexity of commercial sex in Mexico

City, contrasting discourses with some of the sexuality practices of the city inhabitants.

Organization of Commercial Sex At The Turn Of The Century. The French System

The Second Mexican Empire just lasted over three years, from April 10 1864 to June 19, 1867. Maximilian I circulated the first measures to control the spread of venereal disease among his imperial army, in the second year of his brief reign.² He inaugurated an era of state-sponsored prostitution regulation in Mexico. This was an organized scheme characterized by three main principles: “identification, inspection, and incarceration.” This regulation, inherited from Napoleonic France in 1802, left a legacy in Mexico that lasted many more years than the emperor.³

Nine years after the end of Maximiliano’s empire, General Porfirio Díaz took office. Díaz ruled the country for thirty years, from 1876 to 1911, supported by a group of technocratic advisors under the motto “order and progress” [orden y progreso]. This circle of men was known as *los científicos* [the scientists] because the program they designed to modernize the country was inspired by ‘scientific politics,’ a political theory based on the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte, as well as Herbert Spencer’s organicism and social Darwinism. All of these theories—in which society is thought to be governed by evolutionary rules—were well-accepted by a very broad sector of thinkers and intellectuals in the Porfirian era. They provided a pseudo-scientific explanation for the conduct of Mexican criminals: poor people and their way of life were organically related to vice and delinquency, and due to atavism, they would pass the same characteristics to their descendants. By using these principles, lawyers, health officials, doctors, anthropologists, and intellectuals constructed theories about the nature of criminality that implicitly established and justified a social hierarchy ruled by men and other privileged groups.⁴

² Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El régimen jurídico de la prostitución en México,” *Revista de la Facultad de Derecho en México* 85-86 (1972): 86.

³ Jessica R. Pliley, “Claims to Protection. The Rise and Fall of Feminist Abolitionism in the League of Nations Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children, 1919-1936,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 22, no.2 (2010): 97.

⁴ Gerardo González Asencio, “Positivismo y organicismo en México a fines del siglo XX. La construcción de una

“Hygiene” [higiene] was the idea that guided the consolidation of the Porfirian state. It was an obligatory subject in medical programs, and during this time hygienists and doctors participated in the creation of government projects and the redaction of diverse laws, such as those contained in the Penal Code, the Civil Code, as well as the set of laws that regulated prostitution. Policymakers saw hygiene as a mission of national importance; an urgent goal after the wars that characterized the decades following Independence. They wanted to avoid the “increasing weakness of [the] race” that was obstructing modernization.⁵ According to them, the wide sector of Mexican society composed of poor people constituted a social obstacle due to their tendency towards vice, sickness and degeneration. Social illnesses such as alcoholism and prostitution posed a potential risk to the healthy development of the nation.⁶ By teaching moral/hygienic principles and curbing dangerous behavior they wanted to put into place the necessary order for the sake of progress.

In this hierarchical organization women occupied a lower status than men. Female bodies, due to their reproductive function, were at the core of scientists’ concerns. The fields of law, behavior, and medicine spoke of regulating women’s bodies in order to “normalize” [normalizar] their conduct arguing that their “complex and weak physiognomy” placed them at permanent risk of contagion, and made them a significant vector for spreading social illnesses.⁷ According to the logic of this system, a woman could belong to one of two categories: decent women or public women. The first type symbolized the foundations of modern Mexican Porfirian society; the second type was the incarnation of the so-called *necessary evil* [el mal necesario] which threatened decent women’s honor. Men from the government elite created a series of rules to keep women safe from their own desires, protecting the family, and consequently, Mexican society. They never considered regulating

visión determinista sobre la conducta criminal en alcohólicos, mujeres e indígenas,” *Alegatos* 76 (2010): 706-710.

⁵ Fernanda Nuñez Becerra, “Los secretos para un feliz matrimonio. Género y sexualidad en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX,” *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México*, 33 (2007): 12-13. [la debilidad creciente de [la] raza]

⁶ Nuñez Becerra, “Los secretos...,” 14.

⁷ Nuñez Becerra, “Los secretos...,” 6. [la compleja y débil fisiología]

the behavior of those men who visited the bordellos, nor to subject them to medical observation from the state, neither were they asked whether they had anything to do with the spread of social disease.⁸ Fathers and husbands were in charge of supervising *their* women so that they behaved correctly. In other words, heads of households were meant to ensure that the women were still virgins when they got married, and that they stayed faithful after marriage. A dominant idea in the Porfirian period presented the perfect woman as lacking sexual desires –basically performing the role of the immaculate fiancé until becoming the self-sacrificing mother– therefore, all moral control strategies were intended to limit her sexuality.⁹ The hardest judgment from the elites were upon poor women because they were considered to break the moral rules more easily, either by their economic need, or by their low status in the social pyramid that made victims them of atavism and custom.

During the Porfiriato, scientists (particularly physicians) classified everything related to prostitution, to study the “vice distribution in the Mexican capital.”¹⁰ The government issued various laws following the French system’s guidelines to reduce infectious diseases. In 1879, the Secretary of State [Secretaría de Estado] and the Interior Office [Despacho de Gobernación] issued regulations that replaced Emperor Maximiliano’s, but kept prostitutes under surveillance and control: specifically, a law obliged them to be medically examined and to pay a fee to the corresponding office in order to practice sexual commerce. Similarly, houses of prostitution were required to pay taxes to the state. During several decades, from 1898, the Consejo Superior de Salubridad [Superior Council of Health] (a branch of the Interior Ministry), was in charge of registration, medical inspection and internment of prostitutes. The laws that governed sexual commerce were formally stated in the health regulations [Reglamento de Sanidad]. According to the legislation, women who

⁸ Mark Overmyer-Velázquez, “Portraits of a Lady: Visions of Modernity in Porfirian Oaxaca City,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 23, no.2 (2007): 65-66.

⁹ Laura Orellana Trinidad, “‘La Mujer del Porvenir’: raíces intelectuales y alcances del pensamiento feminista de Hermila Galindo, 1915-1919,” *Signos Históricos*, 5 (2001): 109.

¹⁰ Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions. Prostitution, Public Health and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press), 31. [la distribución del vicio en la capital mexicana]

practiced sexual commerce could belong to two main groups, the “apuntadas” [enrolled] and the clandestine: in other words, those who had the license and registration given by the Health Inspection Office and those who practiced prostitution without endorsement from the authorities, respectively. The “apuntadas” could live in groups –in the brothel where they worked– or on their own. In this case, the authority identified these women as “isolated” [aisladas].¹¹ Distributed among these two groups could be found first class, second class or third class prostitutes. This subdivision was based solely on the criteria of the health inspector, who took into account the prostitute’s age, beauty, and other personal attributes.

The regulations also designated a special police force that was in charge of the enforcement of the new laws. Police officers assigned to this task had to watch bordellos, to fine them or to shut them down if they disregarded these regulations, or to arrest the so called “clandestine” [clandestinas] and the “fugitive” [fugitivas] prostitutes, who had registered but avoided medical examination.¹² Negotiations between the women who practiced commercial sex in houses of prostitution and the Health Department Officers were the responsibility of the women who owned these commercial establishments, also known as *celestinas*, *matronas*, *alcabuetas* o *proxenetas*. Places for prostitution had their own classifications, for example; there were *casas de asignación*, [houses of assignation] in which registered prostitutes could work without living there; *casas de citas* [call houses] where registered or unregistered women could socialize with men who they were not married to; and brothels, that is, houses where a numerous group of prostitutes lived and worked. Independent prostitutes, as well as the clandestine ones, generally worked in hotels or in rooms designed for sexual commerce, called *accesorias*.¹³

¹¹ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El régimen jurídico de la prostitución en México,” *Revista de la Facultad de Derecho en México*, 85-86 (1972): 89.

¹² Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El régimen...,” 89.

¹³ Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions...*, 31 and Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El Régimen...,” 89.

Brothels were divided into classes according to their luxury, comforts, taxes and fees paid to the state, and to the *caliber* of women offered to their clients. At first class brothels, clients could enjoy private, comfortable and luxuriously decorated rooms. In extremely low category brothels, prostitutes and their clients had sex on folding beds or rugs with only some old sheets hung as curtains to hide them. In either group, the owners were responsible for containing venereal and social diseases that could spread to the city itself.¹⁴ To this end, health inspection regulations required owners or administrators of brothels to comply with several measures, some related to their workers: to watch that their clothes were clean and that they dressed decently; to ensure that they were at the medical examinations held by Health Department; to provide them with the necessary hygiene items, as well as the medical substances recommended to avoid any venereal contagion; to avoid any disturbance inside or outside the brothel; to keep them from going out in groups that drew attention to themselves; to show the certificates of the women they had in charge to the authorities and to avoid sexual commerce with men that suffered from any venereal disease. They were also forbidden from holding any woman who decided to quit prostitution because of pending debts. Likewise, they would be prosecuted if they stopped any women under their charge from going from one brothel to another with the prior authorization of Health Inspection Office.¹⁵

Women who owned houses of prostitution were also responsible for ensuring that the rooms were clean and for complying with other measures intended to avoid moral deterioration. For example, the law banned gambling, the admittance of anyone under the influence of alcohol, selling alcohol, and did not allow any children under three years old to be kept in the premises. Violation of any of last two rules was punished with a fifteen-day arrest for the first time and with a thirty-day arrest for recidivism.¹⁶ All these legal arrangements made *matronas* mediators not only between clients

¹⁴ Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions...*,31-2.

¹⁵ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El régimen...,” 90.

¹⁶ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El régimen...,” 90.

and prostitutes, but also between prostitutes and the Mexican state, personified in the officers or inspectors of the Health Department. The Internal Regulations of the Health Inspection Office Office also detailed some of their duties. Besides fining for infringements and arresting the clandestine and fugitive prostitutes, these men had to know all sex workers and their work addresses, but they were banned from having any personal relationship with the owners or administrators of prostitution establishments or any other woman involved in prostitution. The beginning of the new century gave birth to the debate, among members of the medical community, for and against state-controlled prostitution. The failure of this system to eradicate or even diminish the spread of venereal disease was the main concern. Houses of prostitution and their owners were the biggest culprits according to those who looked for the suppression of regulated commercial sex. Although the 1910 revolutionary movement delayed and would eventually give new vocabulary to the debate about prostitution, some of its main arguments began to take shape in the first years of the twentieth century.

The World of Prostitution Viewed From The Positivist Perspective

Discourses coming from the state, which delimited the Mexican society's rules of behavior at the beginning of the century, were dictated by the positivist philosophy. The construction of gender differences in every day life was influenced by the idea of society's progressive perfection, and was promoted in a discursive as well as a descriptive manner in the press, manuals of behavior, scientific magazines, and regulations.¹⁷ In 1908, two years before the beginning of the armed movement that ended Porfirio Diaz's regime, Luis Lara y Pardo, a prominent doctor, wrote a sociological study about prostitution in Mexico.¹⁸ This book, aimed at the "general public," [al público en general] had

¹⁷ Carmen Ramos Escandón, "Mujeres positivas. Los retos de la modernidad en las relaciones de género y la construcción del parámetro femenino en el fin de siglo mexicano, 1880-1910," in *Modernidad, tradición y alteridad. La ciudad de México en el cambio de siglo XIX-XX*, ed. Claudia Agostoni y Elisa Speckman (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2001), 293.

¹⁸ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución en México* (Mexico: Librería de la Viuda de Ch. Bouret, 1908).

three objectives: to study the causes as well as the peculiarities of prostitution in Mexico, to present his ideas about the legislation debate, and to give accessible information about preventing the spread of venereal disease caused by sexual commerce.¹⁹ In the first part of his book, Lara y Pardo described and criticized the dynamics related to the world of prostitution. His arguments, although well-supported by sources such as courtrooms, hospitals and official statistics, intended to model social criteria based on the regime's positivist ideology. For this reason, terms such as *prostitution*, *prostitute* or *celestines* are always related to the inevitable destiny of the social groups with the lowest financial resources, considered as atavistic and socially ill.²⁰

Lara y Pardo's essay begins with a debate on what should be understood as *prostitution* and *prostitute*, since he argued the legal definition of these terms did not cover all the shades of sexual activities of many women who could be considered prostitutes due to their behavior. According to Lara y Pardo, taking money in exchange for sex was an insufficient description, so, he proposed another definition: "Prostitution is the habitual act by which a person has temporary sexual intercourse, indistinctly, with several persons."²¹ Nevertheless, he also made clear that some women who had sexual encounters with several men, even if they received a payment for it, could not be considered as prostitutes because these "semi-respectable" [semi-honradas] women kept an emotional bond with their lovers, who they chose meticulously and were faithful to, although the relationships were short-term. Love, selectivity and fidelity would make these women feel offended if any man who was not their partner proposed a sexual or romantic relationship. On the contrary, women, who without receiving any money, had sexual intercourse without emotional bonds and

¹⁹ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, IX.

²⁰ *Celestina* is a term adapted to daily life language from literature. *Celestina* was a supporting character when Fernando de Rojas published *La Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* for the first time in 1499. The old woman that tries to get Calisto and Melibea together was so successful that in the second edition of the book was changed. From that time on the novel has been known as *La Celestina*. Josefa Sánchez Doreste. "Estudio psicológico de un personaje literario: Celestina." Paper presented at the VIII Simposio Internacional de la Sociedad Española de Didáctica de la Lengua y Literatura, Badajoz, Spain, December, 2003.

²¹ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 10. [Prostitución es el acto habitual por el que una persona tiene relaciones sexuales pasajeras indistintamente con diversas personas]

simply sought pleasure with men they knew little or almost nothing about, should be considered prostitutes.

Keeping to Health Inspection Office statistics, Lara y Pardo made a social profile of both the women registered in that office and the clandestine ones. With his research, he concluded that most of the prostitutes in Mexico City were young women between 15 and 30 years old, coming from several regions of the country, mostly Jalisco. The idea that the women of Jalisco are exceptionally beautiful still persists in Mexico, and it is tied to conceptions of race. The lack of significant indigenous population in vast areas of the North of the country and the boom of the mining industry in the colonial era favored European migration. Thus, an important number of the population of that state is white. Lara y Pardo considered that *even* in the lowest social class in Jalisco it was easy to find tall “beautiful, easy, and passionate women” with attractive silhouettes, pretty faces, and the highly appreciated big, almond-colored eyes.²²

From the positivist point of view, almost any working class woman was inclined toward practicing prostitution. Seamstresses, showgirls, models, tortilla makers/sellers [*tortilleras*], saleswomen or female bartenders, all found in their workplaces “an entirely appropriate field” for the development of clandestine prostitution.²³ Sex outside marriage, was also considered as “prostitution,” a “simple habit” without the intention of getting any money in return.²⁴ Based on this idea, maids who worked in brothels were legally considered as prostitutes and, if they were under 35 years old, the regulations forced them to register and to submit to medical supervision at the Health Inspection Office office.²⁵ For Lara y Pardo, the idea of a woman trading with her body only because she was in economic need was not a strong enough argument to justify prostitution. In fact, he lamented that romantic novels had turned prostitutes into heroines, extolling women who,

²² Luis Lara y pardo, *La prostitución...*, 53-4. [hembras hermosas, fáciles y ardientes]

²³ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*,24. [un terreno enteramente apropiado]

²⁴ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*,25. [prostitución/por simple hábito]

²⁵ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El régimen...,” 88.

moved by disappointment and need, found themselves forced to trade with their bodies. From his point of view, there were a great variety of well-paid jobs in the city, which did not require too much knowledge or specific skills and which could keep women from practicing sexual commerce. The positivist explanation for prostitution was more related to class, since poor women learned, at home, the behavior that would lead them to accept degradation.²⁶ Maternity was not a privilege for women dedicated to sexual commerce, according to Lara y Pardo. Prostitutes were considered sterile “[...] if they have children, is generally because they had conceived them before becoming prostitutes.”²⁷ However, psychological, social and moral inferiority was inherited, which would lead lower class women’s daughters to several forms of feminine degradation: begging, delinquency, and prostitution, the last being the most abundant variety of degeneration among them.²⁸

Based on organicists’ theories, the author of *La prostitución en Mexico* states that social parasites can not multiply indefinitely: by natural selection, less apt ones would be eliminated by stronger parasites, which eventually became predators, and would destroy the weaker. In the case of sexual commerce, women who owned houses of prostitution performed this role: moved by the need of constantly looking for new attractions for their clients, they discarded less apt women, abandoning them on the streets, and driving them to look for work in places of lower category or as clandestines.²⁹ Positivist ideas about owners of houses of prostitution related to their abilities to survive and to dominate certain sectors of the dangerous underworld classes, which made them even more dangerous than other women. Brothel-keepers are defined by Lara y Pardo as experienced prostitutes “who had the character and good vision to pass from the exploited class to the exploiting

²⁶ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 38-39.

²⁷ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 109. [“[...] si tienen hijos, es generalmente porque los han concebido antes de haberse prostituido]

²⁸ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 108-110. [“[...] si tienen hijos, es generalmente porque los han concebido antes de haberse prostituido]

²⁹ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 129.

class inside this very well-protected industry.”³⁰ Their abilities to stand out from the rest and to take over a business allowed by the state are heavily criticized by the author who perceived madames as the result of a twisted mind exploiting a perverted environment in their favor.³¹

In the analysis made by Lara y Pardo madames are described as “old, cruel, ambitious and despotic” women who were in their thirties or older, whose beauty had gone. They were “astute and shrewd in the existing evil ways,” moved only by greed.³² Astuteness and shrewdness were some of the few abilities attributed to matronas, and also were considered as their only type of intelligence, which was unworthy because it was at the service of both ambition and social deterioration.³³ Aging of these women was a concept implicit in the laws that regulated commercial sex. If a *matrona* was less than thirty years old, she was legally required to submit to a medical exam. As previously stated, maids less than thirty-five years old at houses of prostitution were also subjected to the same rules as registered prostitutes. This age limit was probably justified by the idea that older women (over thirty in this case) were no longer a potential danger of venereal infection, either because they were not attractive anymore for their clients, or because the idea of women’s sexuality in later life was pretty much inexistent. It is not strange that women were considered old at that age, since life expectancy in Mexico before the Mexican Revolution was approximately thirty years.³⁴

Consistent with his philosophical perspective and social class, Lara y Pardo states that it was extraordinarily rare to find women who had not fallen into “sapphism” inside Mexican brothels, since, according to the author, by means of this “sexual vice” madames satisfied their “perverted old

³⁰ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 81. [que han tenido el carácter y el buen sentido suficiente para pasar de la clase de las explotadas, a la de explotadoras en esa protegidísima industria]

³¹ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 81. [“vieja[s], cruel[es], ambiciosa[s] y déspota[s]”/“astuta[s] y saga[ces] en cuantas maldades hay”]

³² Maja Sabec, “Celestina denostada y glorificada. La ambigüedad en las caracterizaciones literarias de la alcahueta,” *Verba Hispanica: Anuario del Departamento de la Lengua y Literatura Españolas de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Ljubljana* 11 (2003):29.

³³ Maja Sabec, “Celestina denostada...,” 29.

³⁴ Martha Mier y Terán, “Dinámica de la población en México: 1895-1990. El gran cambio demográfico,” *Demos* 4 (1991): 4.

women's” desires and, at the same time guaranteed their commercial interests.³⁵ Although the only evidence to support this argument was the fact that inside brothels sometimes there was just one bed for two women, the author states that lesbianism was one of the main reasons why some women did not leave houses of prostitution: this decision implied leaving “their satisfaction of that perverted love.”³⁶ Instead of considering the statements of Lara y Pardo as a reliable source about lesbian practices, it would be worthwhile to look at the relationship between homosexuality, procuring and danger inside positivist thinking. According to the book, the prostitution house owner—who replaced her lover as soon as a new and attractive apprentice arrived—, initiated all women into lesbianism. Unprotected from the madame’s care, the abandoned ones would seek companionship among other women, also abandoned at some point, as a way to maintain the sexual vice they were now trapped in. As a result, brothel-keepers were even more dangerous in their perversion because they carried out a systematic, constant, meticulous, and successful propagation of lesbianism inside brothels, which deteriorated the social tissue even more.³⁷ There is no mention of male prostitution or man’s homosexual desires. The last section of this chapter will explore some other sources that subtly mention the topic. The positivist perspective supports the idea that prostitution and its places only housed women that worked for men’s pleasure.

In order to maintain operating one of the “most lucrative businesses” in Mexico at the turn of the century, madames looked for the constant turnover of women.³⁸ With the objective of bringing new women to their brothels, madames or a deputy traveled constantly to other parts of the country, or specifically around the places that clandestine prostitutes visited the most.³⁹ Paying attention to the passers-by in streets and villages, they picked out attractive women “with a nice face

³⁵ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 81. [“safismo”/“vicio sexual”/

³⁶ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 82. [sus cómplices en ese amor depravado].

³⁷ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 81.

³⁸ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 53. [uno de los negocios más lucrativos]

³⁹ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 54,92.

and a body that appeared young,” generally belonging to the lowest classes who were an easy prey for their predators.⁴⁰ Brothel owners were not depicted as cruel attackers of helpless victims, but rather as hunters of women, who, due to their social condition, would eventually be working as prostitutes. Lara y Pardo rejected seduction and abandonment as excuses any woman could use to accept *matronas*’ proposals: “every one of those women is not a princess nor a fallen angel or a sacrificed victim [...] Every one of those women [...] from the Mexican *demi-monde*, has been a washerwoman, a fruit seller or a laborer, farm worker’s daughter [...] They are not the rich, the generous or the elegant [...] who cut those women’s blossom who will eventually serve as public lust grass. They are the workers, the servants, the dregs of society.”⁴¹ Furthermore, the author refutes that those women are victims of deception, stating that almost all of them lost their virginity voluntarily, “in that terrible promiscuity where our lower classes live.”⁴²

When new “pupils” were found for houses of prostitution, *celestinas* paid part of their salary upfront in the form of clothing or accessories necessary to do their job. Sometimes they were billed for material goods provided by the owner, quickly becoming indebted and making it difficult for them to leave the brothel.⁴³ Although this practice was controlled by prostitution regulations starting in 1898, Lara y Pardo reported that when it was financially convenient for the *matronas*, this and other rules would be constantly broken. In this sense, there is a tenuous criticism of the state: since the authority allowed the free exercise of prostitution in return for high taxes, *matronas* infringed on some laws to pay the government’s fees without losing their business profits.⁴⁴ In addition to this,

⁴⁰ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 92. [con un rostro agradable y un cuerpo que puede dar la apariencia de juventud]

⁴¹ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 57. [cada una de esas mujeres no es princesa, ni un ángel caído ni una víctima sacrificada [...] Cada una de esas mujeres [...] del demi-monde mexicano, ha sido lavandera, frutera; o hija de un jornalero, del peón esclavo [...] no son los ricos, ni los generosos ni los elegantes [...] quienes cortan la flor de azahar de esas mujeres que más tarde van a servir de pasto a la pública lujuria. Son los obreros, los sirvientes, la hez social]

⁴² Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 57-58. [en esa terrible promiscuidad en la que viven nuestras clases inferiores]

⁴³ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 77.

⁴⁴ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 75.

there were relationships between brothel-keepers and some “unethical and unscrupulous” lawyers who made false accusations against women who wanted to escape the brothel.⁴⁵

Although the discourse around madames dominates the pages of *La Prostitución en México*, the relationship between sex workers and men who lived off the sex trade is also found in a subtle form. These men, who would control sexual commerce in Mexico City several decades later, can be classified into four types: agents designated and trained by the *celestinas* to look for new workers outside the brothel; relatives such as fathers, who with the mother’s consent, depended on the sexual commerce of their daughters to pay for their and/or their family’s expenses; *souteneurs* or *queridos*, men in romantic relationships with prostitutes who were dependent on their women’s income, instead of having a stable job and providing support, as moral norms stated; and *rufianes*, who guarded clandestine prostitutes while they did their jobs in hotels or *acesorias*.⁴⁶

At the beginning of the twentieth century, sexual commerce in Mexico City was generally in feminine hands. Not only because of the amount of women who traded with their bodies —the invisibility of male prostitution numbers during those years does not allow an accurate comparison— but also because mediation between prostitutes and government was a task legally assigned to the *matronas*. Legislation treated exclusively with the owners of the brothels and houses of prostitution, so they had to take the responsibility for their workers and, at the same time, they were in charge of negotiating —observing the law or not— with the government representatives, whether they were inspectors of the Health Department, doctors, or police officers. These dangerous “predators” [predadoras] were, in practical terms, entrepreneurs who operated the brothels and paid taxes to the government. Although Lara y Pardo did not consider them as businesswomen, this adjective underlies the brothel owners stereotype construction in his essay. When he and other doctors presented their opinions regarding state-regulated prostitution, those

⁴⁵ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 79.

⁴⁶Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución...*, 59, 87, 96.

who were openly against it defined brothels as corrupt places of exploitation, slavery and vice. Several years later, these arguments would merge with revolutionary arguments of social justice, thus *matronas* would legally be classified as criminals.

Discussions about Regulation and Abolitionism, 1907-1930. The Failure of the French System

The first three decades of the twentieth century witnessed radical changes in the social, political and cultural life in Mexico. On November 20, 1910 began the armed uprising that put an end to over 30 years of Porfirio Díaz's regime. The old dictator went to Paris in 1911 after signing his resignation and saying one of his most famous quotes: "[Francisco I.] Madero has released the tiger, let's see if he can tame it."⁴⁷ Four years later, Díaz died in the French capital, where his body still rests. Meanwhile in Mexico, Madero could not tame the tiger. Some months after Porfirio Díaz left, the initiator of the Mexican Revolution won the presidential election and took office on November 6, 1911. One year and two months later, Madero was murdered during the coup carried out by Victoriano Huerta. This was the beginning of a struggle for the political control of the country that would last for a decade and would be characterized by the civil war, the death of over a million people, fights between different revolutionary factions, the rise and fall of leaders, as well as military presence in an ever expanding realm of everyday life.

During the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution, the Constitutional Congress approved the Constitution of 1917. Heralded as "the most advanced legal scheme in the occidental hemisphere" it offered agricultural reforms for peasants; protection, rights and social benefits for workers; national control over natural resources; and the elimination of the Catholic Church's influence over governmental duties.⁴⁸ The Mexican state developed from the revolution started to

⁴⁷ [Francisco I.] Madero ha soltado al tigre, a ver si puede domarlo]

⁴⁸ Mary Kay Vaughan, "Introducción. Pancho Villa, las Hijas de María y la Mujer Moderna: el Género en la Larga Revolución Mexicana," in Gabriela Cano, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Jocelyn Olcott, eds., *Género, poder y política en el México posrevolucionario* (Fondo de Cultura Económica/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico, 2009): 39-40. [el esquema legal más avanzado del hemisferio occidental]

build itself on the legal framework provided by the constitution. The state sought the support of large sectors of the population —workers and peasants— and consolidated itself from 1920 to 1930 by incorporating these groups into syndicates and confederations, in addition to making good on its promises of justice with the foundation of the official party in 1929. These decisive changes were part of a socio-political revolution which changed the way Mexicans negotiated with the government, both discursively and practically.⁴⁹ The revolution also transformed the world of prostitution. Discussions between regulators and people who favored the abolition of prostitution began to slowly include revolutionary rhetoric in their arguments, military men reinforced their presence in brothels, meanwhile *celestinas* and *pupilas* used the new ways of negotiation to defend themselves against the laws that affected them directly.

Three years before the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, the National Academy of Medicine designated a commission to make new legislation to fight against venereal disease. One of the members of that commission, the scientific journalist and sometime police inspector, Carlos Roumagnac, raised the flag of abolitionism with his article: “Regulated prostitution: problems, futility and dangers” initiating the first of many discussions between regulators and abolitionists. Roumagnac and some other well known Porfirian intellectuals, such as Luis Lara y Pardo, maintained that regulated prostitution had failed in its main task: being the retaining wall that would hold back venereal disease.⁵⁰

Doctors and policymakers that wanted the suppression of commercial sex regulations based their arguments to explain the system’s failure were based on three main aspects: the lack of a strict enforcement of the law; the government’s protection of a practice which promoted vice; and the prostitutes’ fear of their madames. The law had failed, for instance, focusing on the prostitutes

⁴⁹ Alan Knight, “The Myth of the Mexican Revolution,” *Past and Present* 209 (2010): 237.

⁵⁰ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El Régimen Jurídico...,” 92. [La prostitución reglamentada, Sus inconvenientes, su inutilidad y sus peligros]

(particularly on those registered) as the sole cause of the syphilis and gonorrhea spread, without taking into account the many women infected with those diseases who did not practice sexual commerce. Besides, a large group of clandestine prostitutes left out of medical inspection had to be considered, and quoting Charles Mauriac's *Traitement de la Syphilis*, men against regulation, such as Lara y Pardo timidly mentioned the lack of surveillance of the men who spread venereal disease.⁵¹

Medical inspection had not proven to be an effective method to avoid contagion. Registered prostitutes were afraid of being locked in a hospital, so they sought to elude diagnosis in different ways. For example, they went to the clinic during their menstrual period, which made the examination more difficult.⁵² Doctors who favored the abolition of prostitution were careful to not make their colleagues or the officers of Health Inspection Office responsible for the faults of regulated prostitution. Instead, they blamed the system itself, claiming that regulation forced doctors to issue medical certificates in inappropriate conditions and, at the same time, allowed and incited vice in places protected by the government. Besides, official tolerance was conceived in the newspapers as a means of protection for the owners of the brothels and *casas de citas*. Inspectors could do almost nothing against madames because it was “very frequent [...] they enjoy[ed] great prestige before the humble gendarme's criterion, to whom that woman, by the authorization of the superiority, has the legal right to the protection of the law, not only for her legitimate rights, but also for the interests of her abominable industry.”⁵³ In addition to the law, corruption and *matronas'* deals with powerful men made the work of the Health Inspection Office officers difficult. According to news published in a magazine of the city, inspectors (a total of seventy in 1901) forced at least 20 clandestine prostitutes to be registered or to pay the corresponding fine daily. If they did not carry

⁵¹ Luis Lara y Pardo, “La Prostitución...,” 158.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 206-207.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 212. [muy frecuente [...] que go[zarán] de gran prestigio ante el criterio humilde y penumbroso del gendarme, para quien esa mujer, por el hecho de estar autorizada por la superioridad, tiene derecho al amparo de la ley, no sólo para los derechos legítimos de su persona, sino para los intereses de su abominable industria]

out this assignment, inspectors were fined or reprimanded by their superiors; despite the fact that it was easier to fulfill their quota by finding several women in brothels or call houses [casas de citas], where clandestine prostitutes gathered together, inspectors chose to avoid these places because they did not want any trouble with the influential customers attending.⁵⁴

For people advocating for the suppression of state-sponsored prostitution, a prostitutes' life was the result of greed and corruption that flourished in places for commercial sex. Carlos Roumagnac considered that both the law and matrons held women in houses of prostitution as victims of fear and exploitation. In his own words, the Sanitary Code “kept, developed and spread a bad need” in addition to eliminating some possibilities for the improvement of humankind, such as education for those women who could be classified as “curable,” after a thorough analysis.⁵⁵ The main proposal of those against regulation was to close houses of prostitution because these places did not have any social function, and were a constant source of temptation which did not contribute to decrease men's sexual needs.⁵⁶

According to regulators and the French system, brothels were necessary for two reasons: it was easier to monitor a group of prostitutes in one place, and houses of prostitution played a crucial role in society as protectors of decent women's morality. Regulators also based their case on the respect of basic principles of hygiene and morality. Doctor Eduardo Lavalle y Carvajal presented a series of conferences at the Profilaxis Society in 1909 and 1910 in order to refute Roumagnac's ideas against state-controlled sex trade. Sustaining that prostitution was a necessary evil, incomparable to other social vices, Lavalle claimed that prostitutes' complicity in illicit sexual intercourse was less dangerous from a moral point of view; men went to brothels to “satisfy a physiological sexual desire

⁵⁴ “La Prostitución,” *Lazo de Unión. Revista Política, de Industria, Comercio, Minería, Agricultura, Milicia y Novedades*, July 7, 1901, 2.

⁵⁵ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El Régimen Jurídico...,” 93. [conserva [ba], desarrolla[ba] y propaga[ba] una mala necesidad]

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

that was legitimately born.” Legislation, in addition to being congruent with the moral system, was necessary because of the quantity and “quality” of prostitutes in Mexico City.⁵⁷

For their ideological opponents, these ideas were incorrect and out-dated. First, they argued that state tolerance towards prostitution allowed brothel owners not only to exploit women but also to use all kind of illegal tricks in order to protect their business interests. Secondly, prostitutes lived under fear of madames and incarceration. For that reason, many women preferred working illegally, perhaps even spreading venereal disease, instead of following the government measures. Finally, advocates of abolitionism spoke against the role of brothels as guardians of decency, saying that science had disproved that idea by showing that prostitutes were just degenerate beings that had not diminished the rate of rape or adultery in society as a whole. Decent women would be protected by their own moral strength, instead of depending on morally inferior women.⁵⁸ The main conclusion of their arguments was that regulated prostitution depended on bordellos and it was necessary to eliminate them. Without any legislation, the government would not be promoting a criminal activity or causing *matronas* and prostitutes to assume that their conduct was legal just because they had official paperwork.

As part of their arguments, Mexican doctors used elements of the movement against state-regulated prostitution that arose in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century and turned them into a discussion regarding individual guarantees versus social rights.⁵⁹ Carlos Roumagnac and his

⁵⁷ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El Régimen Jurídico...,” 96. [“satisfacer un deseo sexual fisiológico legítimamente nacido”/“calidad”]

⁵⁸ Luis Lara y Pardo, “La Prostitución...,” 144-145.

⁵⁹ Fabiola Bailón Vásquez. “Las Garantías Individuales Frente a los Derechos Sociales: Una Discusión Porfiriana en torno a la Prostitución” in *Enjaular los Cuerpos: Normativas Decimonónicas y Feminidad en México*, Julia Tuñón ed., (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 2008), 327-374. In 1869, feminist initiatives mainly promoted by Josephine Butler found support from a coalition of middle-class moral reformers and radical workers, who protested in public to demand the revocation of the *Contagious Disease Acts*. Although every group had its own reasons, one of the things that drew more attention in Great Britain was the alliance of working-class men and middle-class feminists to counteract doctors and authorities’ desires to widen the application of the acts. In Mexico there were no social alliances between feminists and workers in the discussions about prostitution. During the first decades of the twentieth century there were organizations of women interested in the elimination of regulated prostitution, but these did not have the same dynamics or strength that the

colleague José Gayón incorporated denouncements made by the British movement in their own discourses, namely those which address men's responsibility in the purchase of commercial sex, and criticize the deprivation of prostitutes' basic guarantees in the name of public health. From their point of view, respect for the laws of the constitution, particularly individual guarantees, was the foundation of the whole civilization. If regulated prostitution had failed to control venereal disease and also held back the progress of the nation, there was no point for it to stay in force. Promoters of abolitionism did not consider the prostitutes' situation, searching for some kind of equity for them as women, mothers or decent women's "fallen sisters," [hermanas caídas] but as individuals. From the positivist point of view, prostitutes were forced by legislation into a situation that was contrary to the evolution of Mexican society.⁶⁰ Quoting Roumagnac:

Every page, every line [in the history of prostitution] will show us, with eloquent as painful facts that despite all the conquest reached with the experience of centuries, we still allow the infringement of the noble and transcendental principle of not to infringe on the individual's freedom [...] The regulation system of prostitution is immoral and illegal [...] because allowing the opening and maintenance of public prostitution centers, favors the development of prostitution; because the same reasons incite women as well as men to vice [...] because it is contrary to the work of education and re-education which must be pursued in favor of humankind's improvement; because it creates in society a special class, for which the guarantees every human being must enjoy, are suspended; and because, although it does not satisfy any individual or social need, affecting one sex and favoring the other, for a right that nature has conferred to both.⁶¹

Like his peers, Roumagnac used arguments from French feminists, supporters of abolitionism and the ideas of Josephine Butler's sympathizers, who expressed their opposition to the

nineteenth-century British feminists had, at least in their discussions related to sexual commerce. Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society. Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1-9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶¹ Quoted in Fabiola Bailón Vásquez, "Las Garantías Individuales..." 364-365. [cada página, cada línea [de la historia de la prostitución] nos demostrarán, con hechos tan elocuentes como dolorosos, que a pesar de todas las conquistas alcanzadas con la experiencia de los siglos, admitimos todavía que se vulnera el noble y trascendental principio de no atentar contra la libertad del individuo [...] El sistema de la reglamentación de la prostitución es inmoral e ilegal [...] porque permitiendo la apertura y sostenimiento de centros públicos de prostitución, favorece al desarrollo de ésta; porque por los mismos motivos incita al vicio tanto a mujeres como a hombres [...] porque es contraria a la obra de educación y reeducación que debe perseguirse en pro del mejoramiento de la especie; porque crea dentro de la sociedad, una clase especial para la que se suspenden las garantías que debe disfrutar todo ser humano; y porque, a pesar de que no satisface ninguna necesidad individual ni social, atenta en un solo sexo y a favor del otro contra un derecho que la naturaleza les ha concedido a ambos]

inequality created by social legislation and institutions. According to these ideas, Roumagnac maintained that it was not admissible to punish only women for an illegal conduct that necessarily required men's participation. However, the Porfirian scientist maintained that he was not a supporter of feminism. As a matter of fact, what he tried to validate was the necessity of state intervention in the reordering of prostitution, because "whores" [las ramerás] could not defend themselves from the system of exploitation they were victims of, since he considered them to have an inferior mentality.⁶²

Discussions between regulators and those who asked for the abrogation of prostitution laws lasted for several years. The armed uprising and the following political and social reordering caused the subject to be considered on numerous occasions, resulting in two more rounds of regulations. Despite the fact that the suppression of state-regulated prostitution was gaining more acceptance in many places of the world, in Mexico, it was not eliminated until 1940. One of the elements that could have influenced the Mexican government's delayed decision, besides years of political instability, was the involvement of different ranks of military members in the prostitution business.

During the Porfirian era, promoters of abolitionism were not only concerned about the inefficiency of the regulations in the reduction of venereal disease, but also about the popularity brothels had attained as "social centers" [centros sociales] propitiating corruption. The start of the revolution in 1910 not only postponed the debate on the regulation of prostitution, but also strengthened the role of brothels as ideal places for the development of relationships going beyond the sex trade. The war increased the number of women dedicated to the sex trade: those who practiced prostitution outside brothels and without the authorization of the state. For some of these women, prostitution represented the opportunity to receive, as payment, money or goods that had

⁶² Ibid., 365-366.

been stolen during battles both by federal army soldiers and revolutionaries, although on other occasions these same men sexually abused prostitutes under the threat of violence.⁶³

During the war, both the physical characteristics of women working at brothels as well as the conditions of the establishments themselves continued determining class divisions. In the poorest neighbourhoods, and in government-created tolerance zones (the result of relocating some of the houses of prostitution) various prostitutes (who did not meet the ideals of beauty and youth) worked with or without government authorization, on unpaved, mosquito-infested streets, with no sewage system, and neighbors wanting them removed far from their “honorable houses.”⁶⁴ In the meantime, in first-class brothels, *madames* made sure that the most attractive women pleased their influential clientele in elegant houses with all kinds of amenities and services.

Authorities reported that by the late 1910s there were 114 houses of prostitution in the city.⁶⁵ These were places used to plan conspiracies and to serve as select clubs where high-ranking military officers gathered together to make political alliances which would define their future. Additionally, during and after the armed stage of the revolution, military men of all ranks invested money in brothels, gambling houses, and cabarets, which contributed to the continuation of the regulated prostitution system for many more years. In 1913, the 1898-era regulations were substituted with a new set of rules, and in 1918, the Council of the Health Department was created. The task of this council was to plan and implement strategies to fight against sexually transmitted diseases, which showed an increase during the war.

During those years, the Chamber of Deputies [Cámara de Diputados] also discussed the budget that should be assigned to Health Inspection Office, the agency in charge of prostitutes' health. Deputy Querido Moheno presented a bill to suspend funding for that office, arguing that its

⁶³ José Luis Trueba Lara, *La vida y la muerte en tiempos de la Revolución* (Mexico: Taurus, 2010), 208.

⁶⁴ Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised positions...*, 66.

⁶⁵ José Luis Trueba Lara, *La vida y la muerte...*, 210.

fight against venereal disease had failed. Revolutionary and nationalist rhetoric began to be used, the same rhetoric that would fill the future debates about prostitution. Moheno stated that the inspection office was not successful because the regulation system had failed, even in France, and Mexico had just transferred “stupidly as stupidly we live copying foreign institutions... and we stagger and stumble along that painful road called national existence.”⁶⁶ The struggle between the national and the foreign would be a key element in the construction of the post-revolutionary state during the first decades of the twentieth century, and it would be no less central in the debate about prostitution.

With Moheno’s proposal, the discussion about individual rights against collective rights re-emerged. In one of the responses to his stance, Jesús Pérez Bolde, a doctor of positivist thinking, stated that “the rights of man” [los derechos del hombre] in the constitution must be respected, except when they damage public health, or when they contribute to “mankind’s degeneration.”⁶⁷ Pérez Bolde agreed that the inspection office had had some failures, mainly allowing many women to continue working, even ill, instead of locking them in the hospital. However, he argued that this situation could be corrected by the modernization of medical equipment and diagnostic methods. What was “absurd and immoral” [absurdo e inmoral] to doctor Pérez Bolde was even to consider that medical exams would harm prostitutes. He emphasized that children’s well-being, as well as the rest of society’s health, was ironically being left aside, so as to not “desecrate the sanctuary of the shameless whore.”⁶⁸

Doctor Pérez Bolde declared at the Chamber of Deputies that the public health issue was looked down upon, and despite their honorable opinions, politicians were not entitled to regulate

⁶⁶ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El Régimen Jurídico...,” 97. [imbécilmente como imbécilmente vivimos copiando instituciones extranjeras...y vamos dando tumbos y traspiés a través de esa vía dolorosa que se llama existencia nacional]

⁶⁷ ¿Por la libertad o por la sociedad? ¿Por el individuo o por el hogar?, *El Imparcial*, May 13, 1913, p.3. [a la degeneración de la especie]

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* [no profanar el santuario de la impúdica ramera]

prostitution issues. On the matter of public health, Pérez Bolde affirmed, the country needed doctors' and hygienists' knowledge, not the deputies' heated speeches, which were only good at generating applause.⁶⁹ Some tension between the new revolutionary political class and the medical community could be perceived in this reply, mainly caused because doctors were in charge of the design and implementation of the public health policies during the Porfiriato, and after the revolution they had to renegotiate their political influence facing a new class of politicians. Gradually, doctors' participation in social reforms became consolidated again, and step by step, they obtained the support of the revolutionary groups in power. Although Querido Moheno's proposal was approved by the legislature, this measure was not put into practice because the continued regulation of prostitution made it necessary to authorize the budget for Health Inspection Office and Morelos Hospital, which were in charge of sick prostitutes' confinement and treatment.

The last regulation that authorized prostitution was approved in 1926 as part of the reforms made by then-president Plutarco Elías Calles. During his tenure (1924-1928) Calles declared that the era of military leaders known as *caudillos* had finished, ceding to a new era of institutions. This meant, among other changes, the creation of the official political party which would bring together the most important groups, including workers and peasant unions, in order to avoid armed conflicts related to presidential succession.⁷⁰ As the creator of the official party, Calles took advantage and extended his power. The period from 1928 to 1934 is known as the *Maximato*, because the three presidents who took the office after Calles, also known as the "Maximum Chief of the Revolution," [El Jefe Máximo de la Revolución] were completely subordinated to his orders. During those years of relative stability, the Mexican government started to sign international agreements, such as the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ From that moment, and for 70 years, Mexican presidents were chosen by "dedazo," that is, the current president decided who would succeed him based on sympathy and personal convenience. Although every six years elections were held, the candidate previously selected always won. This uninterrupted dynasty of a single political party is what the Peruvian Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa called [la dictadura perfecta] "the perfect dictatorship."

resolutions approved in the 1924 Pan-American Health Conference in Havana, Cuba. In that meeting, several measures to fight venereal disease were agreed upon, such as abolitionism and prosecution of prostitution. Despite signing these treaties the government issued a new Public Sanitary regulation in 1925 and another for the practice of prostitution the following year. With the use of the regulations approved by president Calles, doctors at the Health Inspection Office office tried to change the way venereal disease had been fought. The strategy had three fundamental principles: the widening of the sexually transmitted diseases catalogue, the prohibition of bordellos and clandestine women operating without licenses, and the “moral elevation of women dedicated to prostitution.”⁷¹

In this way, the state prohibited sexual trade in the 1926 regulations, not only for women who suffered from venereal disease, but also for those who had symptoms of scabies, cancer, tuberculosis “and [...] any others [diseases] that the Department of Health considers advisable.”⁷² Similarly, the report of activities sent by the Public Department of Health to President Calles included the details of changes made inside Health Inspection Office to fight clandestine prostitution. Doctor Bernardo Gastélum stated the number of registered and inspected women had increased as a consequence of the implementation of new regulations and the extension of Health Inspection Office working hours. The personnel of that office were on duty permanently, mornings and evenings, including holidays.⁷³ With the objective of decreasing clandestine prostitution — defined as one of the most important mechanisms of contagion due to the lack of state control— regulation imposed various penalties to assignation houses, brothels or hotels which did not have the authorization of the Department of Health to practice prostitution. In addition, the new

⁷¹ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El Régimen Jurídico...,” 99. [elevación moral de la[s] mujer[es] que se dedica[ban] a la prostitución]

⁷² “Reglamento para el Ejercicio de la Prostitución.” *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública*, no.1-2 (1926): 164. [y [...] demás [padecimientos] que el Departamento de Salubridad estime convenientes]

⁷³ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El Régimen Jurídico...,” 99.

regulation widened the definition of “clandestine brothels” [prostíbulos clandestinos] to include restaurants, taverns, cafes, and cabarets which allowed sexual trade.⁷⁴ Penalties for the owners of these places ranged from fines, up to fifteen days of arrest, or to the closing of the establishment, whereas the clandestine prostitutes were sent to Health Inspection Office or an authorized clinic for examination. If any of these women suffered from any of the diseases included in the law, the doctor in charge sent her to the feared Morelos Hospital. There, bureaucrats began to practice their policy of “moral elevation” [elevación moral] whose main goal was the redemption of those women working in the sex trade due to “ignorance or misery” [ignorancia o miseria].⁷⁵

Of all the reforms carried out by the authorities in the fight against venereal disease, those related to “morals” [la moral] were the most important, both in strategy and rhetoric. According to the Department of Health, the strategy allowed women to leave the hospital not only free from venereal disease but with abilities that allowed them to leave the sexual trade behind.⁷⁶ Unlike the positivist rhetoric that predominated at the turn of the century, this new perspective allowed women who had been dedicated to prostitution to reinsert themselves, if they wished, into the life of the city without the condemnation of social atavism. In addition, federal and health authorities related the concept of “exploitation,” [explotación] in the regulations and in the debates, to those who lived directly off the sexual trade of women. In 1927 the League of Nations published a study that pointed out several countries in Latin America, including Mexico, as ideal places for human trafficking. According to international feminists who supported that investigation, regulated prostitution was the main reason, all around the world, for women’s trafficking. Feminism women encouraged a debate in The League of Nation’s Advisory Committee on the Traffic of Women and

⁷⁴ “Reglamento para el Ejercicio...,” 181.

⁷⁵ “En el Hospital Morelos,” in *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública*, (México: Editorial Cvltvra, 1925), 139. A brief history of the hospital with an emphasis on the 1926 renovations and its consequences are explained in chapter 2.

⁷⁶ “El Hospital Morelos ha Quedado Convertido en una Institución Nueva y Bien Instalada,” *El Universal*, January 1, 1926, Cuarta Sección, 8-9.

Children where they said that state-authorized brothels were an ideal place for men's exploitation of women, with governmental approval.⁷⁷

Although regulated prostitution continued in Mexico for one more decade, authorities made gradual changes were made according to recommendations dictated by the League of Nations, two of which were the criminalization of human trafficking and the creation of the offense of *lenocinio* (procuring/pimping), included for the first time in 1929's penal code. A couple of years later the following definition was written for Mexico City's law books: "the *lenón* is anyone who *without legal authorization* habitually or accidentally exploits the body of a woman through sexual commerce and who is maintained through that or obtains any kind of profit."⁷⁸ Brothel and madames continued being the authorized institutions and intermediaries for commercial sex but, at least on paper, the state condemned exploitation and human trafficking.

In practice, only a few were accused and convicted of *lenocinio* in Mexico City during the years following the announcement of the law. From 1934 —the first case registered in the penitentiary records— to 1940 —the year of the abolition of regulations that allowed prostitution— 50 men and 58 women were arrested. This number becomes more significant if we take into account that during the six years following the elimination of prostitution regulations, a total of 715 people were arrested accused of the same felony.⁷⁹ The reasons for the hardening of Mexico's policy on procuring can be found mostly in the final discussions between those in favor and against regulated prostitution during the decade of the 30s.

⁷⁷ Jessica R. Pliley, "Claims to Protection..." 91.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions...*, 145-6. Italics added.

⁷⁹ Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México (hereafter AHCM), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaría. Expedientes de reos, Delito: lenocinio, 1934-1952.

*Discussions about Regulation and Abolitionism, 1930-1940. Change of Vocabulary, New Discourses and the
Suppression of State-Sponsored Prostitution*

In 1930 the Council of General Health of the Republic [Consejo de Salubridad General de la República] created a commission to issue a report on the most suitable system to handle the prostitution problem. In favor of choosing the abolition of regulations, specialists suggested the necessary measures to control the spread of venereal disease and white slavery. In the final resolution of the commission, it can be seen that the regulated system was weakening, and that the arguments derived from the international meetings Mexico attended, were becoming integral to the analysis of those in charge of designing public health policies.⁸⁰ For example, the report referred to the communiqué sent to the Mexican government by the Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children of the Nations Society, maintained that de-regulating prostitution had reduced the danger of human trafficking, and declared, as unfounded, the fear that those measures caused the rise of venereal disease or any disruption of public welfare.⁸¹

Backed by this important international organization and the ideals of the revolution, Mexican promoters of abolitionism defined the arguments that eventually would lead to the elimination of regulated prostitution. During the decade, there were arguments discussing European feminism, the concepts of individual and collective rights, and the role of the state in the observance of those rights. Even though the fight against venereal disease maintained great importance, the campaign against exploitation was gaining ground. On several occasions, doctors and men responsible for the design of health policies referred to ideas of European feminists, such as Josephine Butler or the Madrid-born Clara Campoamor, to fight the idea of prostitution as a “necessary evil.” Picking up the debate regarding the violation of individual rights, those who favored abolitionism argued that regulation was unacceptable because registration and inspection made easy the slavery of a specific

⁸⁰ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El Régimen Jurídico...,” 106-10.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

social group in a democratic country. Besides, with forced confinement in the hospital, prostitutes were imprisoned for a crime that was not categorized in the penal code, letting the accomplices of that offence –that is, men– free because regulations did not prescribe any punishment for them.⁸² It is necessary to reiterate that although whole paragraphs of European feminist work were quoted, it cannot be stated that Mexican specialists were open supporters of feminism. So far, documents have not shown evidence of doctors and policy makers working along with Mexican feminists, which were also influenced by international debates on prostitution.

During the first decades of the twentieth century different feminist trends coexisted in the international women's movement, but the prostitution debate in Mexico took some elements from the Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children, formed mostly by European activists.⁸³ The committee sought for an impartial moral standard where men and women were judged in a similar way for similar sexual behaviors; arguing that laws which identified women as “prostitutes” punished their conduct unfairly, since they still let men participate freely in the sex trade. Additionally, the Committee of the League of Nations tenaciously demanded the abolition of state regulation of prostitution.⁸⁴

Mexico became a member of the League of Nations on September 7th 1931. In 1919, when this organization was formed, Mexico had not been invited due to the instability of its internal politics, so its entry represented the international validation of the revolutionary government.⁸⁵ Regarding prostitution, this meant the victory of abolitionism. During the decade, several meetings, national and international, took place. Specialists took up again the main elements of the feminist

⁸² Alfredo Oviedo Mota, “El Problema Social de la Prostitución en México,” 1930, AHSS, Fondo Salubridad Pública, Sección: Servicio Jurídico, box 20, file: 10, p.2.

⁸³ The only representative of a Latin American country in the Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children was Paulina Luisi, leader of the feminist movement in Uruguay. Jessica R. Pliley, “Claims to Protection...,” 94-5.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁸⁵ Manuel Tello, “Algunos Aspectos de la Participación de México en la Sociedad de Naciones,” *Foro Internacional* 6, no. 2-3 (1965-1966): 358-9.

stance inside the League of Nations and adapted it to the revolutionary rhetoric. Therefore, in the discourse, the government and the achievements of the armed struggle would be responsible for changing the situation of sex workers in the country. From this stand point, abolitionism advocates asked the state to leave behind the practices of “dictatorship government” [el gobierno de la dictadura] and to start bringing “the daughters of the people” [las hijas del pueblo] to redemption by means of work, instead of abandoning them to the hands of seducers and brothel-keepers who divested them of dignity, aspirations, and eventually, of fundamental legal rights. Unlike the positivist point of view, which condemned low-class workers’ daughters to vice and degradation, abolitionists of the 1930s sought, as part of the revolutionary agenda, to rescue workers and peasants’ offspring from poverty, humiliation, and slavery according to the governmental program of popular liberation.⁸⁶

Those in favor of abolitionism also criticized the role of the state as an accomplice in women’s exploitation. According to this perspective, the problem was the way the penal code was written, since it only considered punishment for those persons making money from sexual commerce “without authorization.” As a consequence, the government registered, monitored, and locked up women; at the same time it collected taxes from the owners of the houses of prostitution. The state then became a “white slaver [by accepting] the contribution, and a procurer by looking after women so men had a safe place.”⁸⁷ Of course, both activities were considered inappropriate for a revolutionary government, which should not maintain control since its failure against venereal disease had been demonstrated repeatedly.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Alfredo Oviedo Mota, “El Problema Social de la Prostitución en México,” 1930, AHSS, Fondo Salubridad Pública, Sección: Servicio Jurídico, box 20, file: 10, p.3.

⁸⁷ Eliseo Ramírez, “El Departamento de Salubridad frente al Problema de las Enfermedades Venéreas.” *Boletín de Salubridad e Higiene* III, no.1 (1940): 383-4. [“sin autorización”/ “en tratante de blancas [al aceptar] la contribución y en tratante de blancas [al aceptar] la contribución y en proxeneta mediante la vigilancia de las mujeres para que los hombres tengan un lugar seguro”]

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Although some women's organizations in Mexico participated in forums where prostitution was discussed, it cannot be declared that they had a direct influence on the government's decisions about the issue. At least during the first half of the twentieth century, feminists faced several obstacles both inside and outside their groups. They agreed only a few times on the topics to be analyzed, or the strategies or programs to follow. Besides, most worked long shifts, with little time to participate continuously in the movement, and, there was little support received from government, religious critics, or conservative groups. There was also minimal coverage from the press: newspapers did not report about their activities unless something major had happened, for example, the Conference against prostitution in 1934.⁸⁹

In a meeting called by the Iberian and Hispanic Women's League [Liga de Mujeres Ibéricas e Hispanoamericanas], participants made it clear they did not want to morally blame women who practiced prostitution, nor to play the role of redeemers. On the contrary, their objective was to study the social causes of sexual commerce and to propose measures to prevent it. During this conference there were some opposing postures and even confrontations, particularly between communists and the organizers, since they disagreed on the elements that gave rise to prostitution. The former maintained that the economic situation forced women to trade their bodies, making the government responsible, because it did not provide higher salaries for workers or allow them an escape from poverty. The League organizers preferred to separate the issues from "a political debate" that would not contribute to the discussion.⁹⁰ In the end, both postures found points of agreement which were also connected to the proposals of abolitionism advocates and the League of Nations: the abrogation of the regulations which legalized sexual commerce, and strong

⁸⁹ Anna Macías, *Contra Viento y Marea. El Movimiento Feminista en México hasta 1940* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2002), 13-16.

⁹⁰ María de los Ángeles Evangelista Quintero, "Congreso contra la Prostitución de 1934. La Prostitución en la Década de los Treinta" (BA thesis, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 1995), 70-2. ["un debate político"/"los tratantes de blancas"/"los contaminadores de enfermedades venéreas"]

punishments for “white slavers” and “venereal disease spreaders.” Similarly, they requested the prohibition of obscene publications, and the closure of ballrooms, cabarets and bars.⁹¹ Some of these demands were close to being fulfilled. The definitive change in the attitude of the Mexican government against prostitution regulations coincided with an important political time: the end of the *Maximato*, and the beginning of general Lázaro Cárdenas’ administration in December 1934. The political rivalry between Plutarco Elías Calles and the new president (who did not give in to Calles’ political pressure like his predecessors) culminated with the expulsion of the Maximum Chief of Revolution from the country in 1936.

The close relation of former president Calles, his political allies, and his family with the world of prostitution is an important part of the rumours about the everyday life of these characters. Even Graciela Olmos, *La Bandida*, told in her memoirs that the tension between the two generals reached its peak when Calles’ son got drunk at one of the parties Olmos offered in her brothel. According to *La Bandida*, Rodolfo Calles bragged about his intentions to remove Cárdenas from power and declare himself as president of Mexico. Secret service agents overheard him, so Cárdenas and his close friends sped up plans to exile Plutarco Elías Calles.⁹² Unlike other generals raised in the war, Lázaro Cárdenas did not have any visible relation with prostitution. This, combined with the increasing national and international pressure of people who favored abolitionism and his own participation as coordinator of the moralizing campaigns in the army in the mid 1920s, must have contributed to the final de-regulation of prostitution during the last two years of his government.⁹³ The measures against sexually transmitted diseases and human trafficking were condensed into the Regulation for the Campaign against Venereal Disease and the reforms to the penal code.

⁹¹ Ibid., 80.

⁹² Eduardo Muñuzuri, *Memorias de la Bandida*, 89-93.

⁹³ “El Ejército hace Labor de Saneamiento Social. En las Zonas Petroleras se Están Cancelando Todos los Garitos, Cantinas y Casas de Lenocinio,” *El Demócrata de México*, April 14, 1925, “Los Militares No Podrán Penetrar a las Cantinas,” *El Demócrata*, March 8, 1925, “Inexorable Moralización de los Miembros del Ejército,” March 15, 1925, in Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca (hereafter APECFT), Fondo: Amaro, Serie: 0313, file 34, inventory 345, file 3-5.

According to the new legislation, any person infected, regardless of sex or profession, was obliged to follow a medical treatment; the crime of contagion was included in the penal code; and the concept of procuring was widened to include anyone who exploited the body of another person, led her to prostitution, or profited from their sexual commerce.⁹⁴ As a consequence, the government started a campaign against venereal disease in which the legal concept of the crime of contagion occupied a central place. From that moment on, sick people were forced by law to be treated in designated clinics. Doctors were asked to keep private records of patients' personal information, and to define "the possible source of contagion, specifying if possible, name and address."⁹⁵ Among other measures implemented wet nurses needed to have medical certification, and couples that wanted to get married had to get certificates testifying they did not suffer from venereal disease.⁹⁶

The modification of Article 207 of the penal code intended to decrease human exploitation. The law did not ban or target the practice of prostitution, but did punish those who profited from sexual commerce. Besides eliminating the phrase "anyone without legal authorization," the reforms specified "the crime of procuring [...] who directly or indirectly, administer, run or own brothels, *casas de citas* or places to concur, expressly dedicated to exploit prostitution and get any profit from its products."⁹⁷ The law, signed in late 1939 and in force between February and March, 1940, had as the main objective the prosecution of *padrotes* [pimps] and *madames*, although the latter were the most affected by the changes. As authorities held records on houses of prostitution, the establishments became an ideal target. In 1940 and 1941, 138 persons accused of procuring were arrested, 101 of

⁹⁴ "Reglamento para la Campaña Contra las Enfermedades Venéreas," "Reformas al Código Penal." *Boletín de Salubridad e Higiene* III, no.1 (1940): 232,277.

⁹⁵ "Reglamento para la Campaña Contra las Enfermedades Venéreas." *Boletín de Salubridad e Higiene* III, no.1 (1940): 225-30. [la fuente probable del contagio, especificando, de ser posible nombre y dirección]

⁹⁶ *Ibi*

⁹⁷ "Reformas al Código Penal." *Boletín de Salubridad e Higiene* III, no.1 (1940): 231-2. ["anyone without legal authorization"/"Comete el delito de lenocinio [...] el que regentee, administre o sostenga directa o indirectamente prostíbulos, casas de citas o lugares de concurrencia expresamente dedicados a explotar la prostitución y obtengan beneficio de sus productos"]

them women, and many of the men accused worked in brothels of these same women. It is interesting to point out that in 1939, one year before the abolition, only two, a man and a woman, were convicted for the same crime (Table 1).⁹⁸

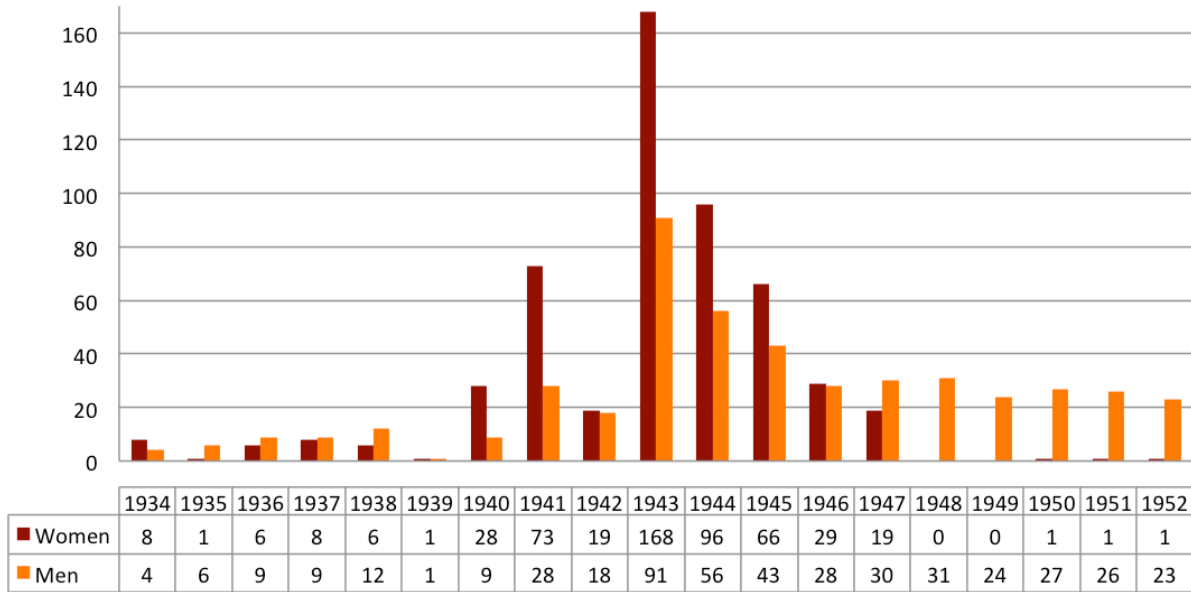
Supporters of abolitionism in Mexico were pleased with the measures implemented by the government. From their point of view, the elimination of regulated prostitution including the closure of brothels, reduced the opportunities to practice sexual commerce at the same time that human trafficking and organized commercial exploitation were punished. With the prosecution of a “social subclass anti-revolutionary and incompatible with the ideas [...] [of] the current government” the Mexican state split from its role of accomplice to become the guarantor of public health as well as individual rights.⁹⁹ Whereas the government, doctors, and others in charge of health policies celebrated the elimination of regulations, critics did not wait long to disagree. There were opinions in newspapers that condemned “the reform of the customs by means of a legislative fact, which was assumed [...] as infallible,” while some opinions were skeptical of the efficacy of the measures, which did not take into account the economic, moral and social causes of prostitution. In this respect, they maintained that no system had been able to slow down this activity in any country in the world, that exploitation would not end as long as money kept a predominant place in society’s values, and that the only result would be that “honorable” women stayed at home when night fell, in order to not be harassed by inspectors of the Health Department.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ AHCM, Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaría. Expedientes de reos, Delito: lenocinio, 1934-1952.

⁹⁹ Enrique Villela, “Dictamen del H. Senado de la República al Aprobar la Nueva Legislación Antivenéreas Mexicana. Anotaciones.” *Boletín de Salubridad e Higiene* III, no.1 (1940): 225-30. [subclase social antirrevolucionaria e incompatible con las ideas [...] [d]el actual gobierno]

¹⁰⁰ “Por el Ojo de la Llave. Reformas al Código Penal,” n.d, “A la Hora Cero del Día de Ayer,” n.d, in Archivo General de la Nación, México, (hereafter AGN), Fondo: Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, Box 0668, File 525.3/1. [“reformar las costumbres mediante un acto legislativo, que se supone [...] infalible”/“honradas”]

Table 1. Pimping/Procuring Court Cases by gender (1934-1952)
Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México



City neighbors also complained about the consequences of prostitution de-regulation. They maintained that the decree had caused sexual commerce to go into the streets, because of the lack of a well-defined tolerance zone. As a result, the unpleasant coexistence of “honorable workers and children with prostitutes and degenerates” had intensified. “What was intended by disseminating them throughout Mexico City?” asked E. Vera in a letter sent to President Cárdenas in 1939. Protests complained of the rising number of clandestine houses, disguised businesses (restaurants, bars, small soda stores) where prostitution was practiced, and small neighborhood rooms, which operated as love hotels.¹⁰¹ Sex workers were sorry for the closure of prostitution houses and for the lack of a planned zone where they could work without pressure from police: “currently we have

¹⁰¹ “Los suscritos inquilinos, comerciantes y propietarios,” 1940, “Román Barrón de Nacionalidad Mexicana,” 1940, “Con todo respeto voy a narrar los desórdenes,” n.d, “Me dirijo a usted rogándole,” 1939, Ibid. [“honrados trabajadores y niños con prostitutas y degenerados”/“¿Qué se pretendió con desparramarlas por todo el Distrito Federal?”]

been harassed, in a way that there is no doubt about it, [...] from the street we are taken to the police stations.”¹⁰²

However, intensification of urban life during those years made it more difficult to demarcate a tolerance zone. Specialists had already pointed out the increase in population and the rapid growth of Mexico City as causes of clandestine prostitution, because they provided the ideal means to avoid regulations.¹⁰³ From 1940 onwards, all the actors involved in sexual commerce started a fight for the urban spaces that eventually led to the disappearance of authorized brothels from the urban scene. In this confrontation, *celestinas* were the main enemies of the revolutionary state. During the first years (1940-1946) the fight against vice became a national security matter, and the closure of brothels as well as the group arrest of their owners and managers reached an unusual peak (Table 2). In the context of the Second World War, president Manuel Ávila Camacho sent an official letter to the mayor of Mexico City, Javier Rojo Gómez, to encourage him to uphold federal laws concerning the fight against venereal disease. In the letter, the president maintained that vice centers —any establishment where alcohol, drugs or sexual activities were traded— were meeting places for “subversive and disloyal elements” that took advantage of these spaces for “dangerous and antisocial” activities.¹⁰⁴ Although Ávila Camacho sent a similar letter to every province in the country, many of them did not abolish regulated prostitution in their local penal codes. In 1957, at a request from the United Nations, Mexico sent a report on prostitution in the country, which stated that the situation was not uniform, and that in 27 out of the 32 federal entities, the regulated system was still in effect, with numerous deficiencies regarding sanitary control.¹⁰⁵ As a matter of fact, the

¹⁰² “Gloria Mendoza Valdez, de Nacionalidad Mexicana,” n.d, Ibid. [“actualmente se nos viene molestando en forma que no deja lugar a duda, [...] de la calle se nos lleva a las Delegaciones”]

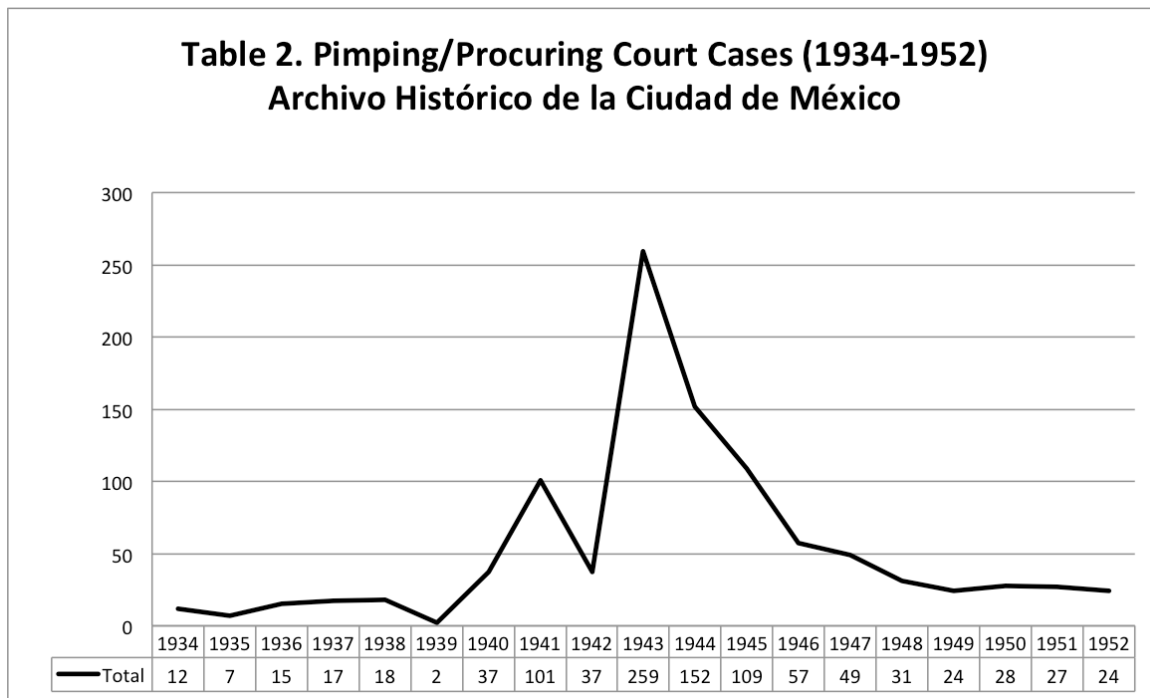
¹⁰³ Eliseo Ramírez, “El Departamento de Salubridad...” 382.

¹⁰⁴ “Recientemente me Dirigí a Todos los Gobiernos,” 1942, in AGN, Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho, file 462.3155. [“elementos subversivos y desleales”/“peligrosas y antisociales”]

¹⁰⁵ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El Régimen Jurídico...,” 130. The four entities that reformed their local constitutions with regard to prostitution were: Baja California Sur, Nayarit, Quintana Roo and Tabasco. Mexico City has no local constitution. Since it was chosen as the seat of the federal powers in the nineteenth century, laws different from the

decrease of venereal diseases was caused by the discovery of penicillin, rather than the effectiveness of any system.

From 1940 to 1946, the moralizing campaign of president Ávila Camacho against vice centers was a fundamental part of his government project, regardless of the reluctance of some local governments. Some of the main urban centers at the United States border, as well as the capital of the country, were where the federal strategy of security was applied more severely. During that time, madames gave a tough fight to keep their businesses running. To that end, they used legal strategies, such as the right to legal protection [*derecho de amparo*] or the creation of unions, as well as several illegal tactics, such as bribes, false statements or corruption. As these maneuvers failed repeatedly, registered brothels and their owners vanished from the streets of Mexico City, whereas street solicitation and pimps began to gain more ground.



rest of the country have ruled the Federal District. Legally it is considered that this territory belongs to the nation, therefore, for most of the twentieth century (1927-1997), the president administered this entity through the Departamento del Distrito Federal. It was 1997 when the first elections for city mayor were held. The debate over the appropriateness of a constitution for the Federal District still remains.

Male Prostitution

[...] Sorrowful and broad city where there is room for dogs,
for misery and homosexuals,
for prostitutes and for poets' famous melancholy,
for prayers and orations.
Sarcastic city where cowardice and cynicism are the daily bread
of young pimps with undulating hips,
of *mujeres asnas*, of empty men. [...]
We declare our hatred for you, magnificent city.
For you, for your sad and vulgarest bourgeoisie,
for your girls made of air, candy and American *films*,
for your *ice-cream* youth, stuffed with garbage,
for your relentless queers who destroy
schools, Plaza Garibaldi,
and the lively and poisonous San Juan de Letrán street.
We declare our hatred for you, perfected by feeling you more immense every day,
softer every hour, sharper every line. [...]¹⁰⁶

These verses belong to Efraín Huerta's poem "Declaración de odio" [Declaration of Hatred] written in 1937. In his lines, the poet portrays the urban spaces of his time, as well as some who dwell within them —those who bothered him most. He writes of people with different lifestyles attempting to coexist, some taking over the streets, in a city which was turning "more immense every day" due to migration and modernity. Men and women came from other parts of the country to search for job opportunities in the capital; many also had the chance to rebuild their identity thanks to the anonymity and pace of life of Mexico City. Members of the middle class, new generations beginning to adopt American cultural influences in the way they spoke and behaved, as well as Conservative Catholics, coincided on the same streets where poor people, pimps, prostitutes

¹⁰⁶ *Mujeres asnas* (lit. donkey women) is a term adopted by Huerta from Julio Torri, his Spanish literature professor at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria. In two articles published in 1936 and 1937, the poet provides a complex definition of the term. It is clear that it refers to a type of woman Huerta thoroughly despised: "mujeres asnas are the ruin of great men," "Pretty, more blond than brunette, maudlin [...] naively corny; passionate; innocently dreamy; immoral to the extent of seeming even more dull; normal reaching nonsense; stubbornly flirtatious [...] willing, coarse and clumsy; active (fortunately and unfortunately, they abound); cinematographic; idiotic". Isabelle Pouzet, "La Ville Comme TERRITOIRE: Mexico Dans 'Declaración de Odio' et 'Declaración de Amor' d'Efraín Huerta," *Pandora*, no. 10 (2010): 209. [Amplia y dolorosa ciudad donde caben los perros/la miseria y los homosexuales/las prostitutas y la famosa melancolía de los poetas/los rezos y las oraciones de los cristianos./Sarcástica ciudad donde la cobardía y el cinismo son alimento diario/de los jovencitos alcahuetes de talles ondulantes/de las mujeres asnas, de los hombres vacíos [...]/Te declaramos nuestro odio, magnífica ciudad./A tí, a tus tristes y vulgarísimos burgueses,/a tus chicas de aire, caramelos y films americanos, /a tus juventudes ice cream rellenas de basura,/a tus desenfrenados maricones que devastan/las escuelas, la plaza Garibaldi,/la viva y venenosa calle de San Juan de Letrán./Te declaramos nuestro odio perfeccionado a fuerza de sentirte cada día más inmensa,/cada hora más blanda, cada línea más brusca]

and homosexual men lived. Like Efraín Huerta, neighbors and journalists complained about the presence of *immoral* persons in the city center. Unfortunately, sources consulted offer little information on male homosexual prostitution at that time. Homosexual men appear, in a scattered manner, in the documents connected with commercial sex. It has been seen in this chapter that policymakers rather ignored them in regards to sex trade. As recent as 1970, when writing the history of prostitution and its regulation, an academic remarked that “prostitution among men [...] is practically unknown or without major effects. Thus, we do not have to go in depth on this topic.”¹⁰⁷ A brief reflection on it will be undertaken here, to suggest two ideas about the complex relations between prostitution, sexuality, and the city. The first idea is to think about the interaction of sex workers, men and women, in the streets and in brothels; second, to conceive closed spaces as sites where some men, as customers, found certain freedoms to express and satisfy sexual desires they could not openly reveal in their daily lives.¹⁰⁸

The capital city represented an escape for those homosexual men who had to bear mocking, beating, family disdain, humiliation, dismissals, imprisonment, or even murder, in their hometowns during the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁹ In the city they were also victims of similar expressions of contempt that could have tragic endings. However, modernity, accelerated growth, and urban spaces permitted more mobility for homosexual migrants in general. In the 1920s and 1950s, gay men from political, intellectual, and cultural classes escaped harassment mostly because of

¹⁰⁷ Ricardo Franco Guzmán, “El régimen...,” 133. [la prostitución entre hombres [...] es prácticamente desconocida o sin mayores efectos. En consecuencia, no debemos detenernos más en esa cuestión]

¹⁰⁸ The historiography of homosexuality in Mexico City has privileged male spaces and relationships. Public baths, movie theaters, parks, and avenues have been pointed out by experts as places that promoted sexual awakening and homoeroticism. Prisons were also spaces of sexual interaction where coercion, violence and jealousy were present. See the research by Pablo Picatto, Víctor M. Macías-González, Carlos Monsiváis, Anne Rubenstein or Robert Buffington in books such as: Robert McKee Irwin, Edward J. McCaughan and Michelle Rocío Nasser (eds.), *The Famous 41. Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); Robert Buffington, *Criminal and Citizen in Modern Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Víctor M. Macías González and Anne Rubenstein (eds.), *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2012).

¹⁰⁹ Carlos Monsiváis, “Los Gays en México: la Fundación, Ampliación y Consolidación del Guetto,” *Debate Feminista*, vol. 26 (2002): 96.

their money and prestige, and these resources helped to establish spaces in the city where intimidation or assaults could be reduced.¹¹⁰ This liberty must not be considered absolute, but it was essential for the flowering of male homosexuality in the capital city.

According to Carlos Monsiváis, the choice of occupation for homosexual men was controlled by pragmatic criteria during this period. The best options were definitely the jobs in which sexual identity did not matter much to their colleagues.¹¹¹ In this sense, prostitution might have been an alternative that allowed them to survive in the city without the need to conceal their preferences; moreover, it is probable that they could earn more by being out in public. It is quite likely that the same dynamics influenced the choice of places to live for male sex workers; in some streets within the tolerance zone downtown they could surround themselves with women, who, just like them, bore society's prejudice.

In *Los Mil y Un Pecados* [One Thousand and One Sins] Eduardo Delhumeau describes a conversation held between two men. One of them, who came from San Miguel de Allende in Guanajuato, bitterly complained that a painter and all his “*maricas*” [queer companions] had invaded his hometown. His friend, a merchant from Mexico City, replied:

Poor San Miguel de Allende! But here at the Capital, things are also wrong in that matter [...] movie theaters are full of *maricas* [queers], particularly the one in San Juan de Letrán, the Venecia and the Politeama, without the companies or the police being able to do anything to stop it. The Alameda central is still the favorite place for hundreds of effeminate men, and in the streets of Cuauhtemotzín there are several buildings where these men occupy various apartments; you can see them night and day going up and downstairs, swinging their hips and singing songs like a woman, plastered in makeup. And it is curious that the sinful women, wandering around, fraternize with them, despite the fact that in the past [...] these women hated them and attacked them.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Carlos Monsiváis, “Ortodoxia y Heterodoxia en las Alcobas (Hacia una Crónica de las Costumbres y Creencias Sociales en México),” *Debate Feminista*, vol. 11 (1995): 183-210; and “De las Variedades de la Experiencia Homoerótica,” *Debate Feminista*, vol. 35 (2007): 163-192.

¹¹¹ Carlos Monsiváis, “De las Variedades de la Experiencia Homoerótica,” *Debate Feminista*, vol. 35 (2007): 176.

¹¹² Eduardo Delhumeau, *Los Mil y Un Pecados* (Mexico: Omega, 1939) quoted in Carlos Monsiváis and Renato Leduc, “Los Iguales, los Semajantes, los (Hasta Hace un Minuto) Perfectos Desconocidos (A Cien Años de la Redada de los 41),” *Debate Feminista*, vol. 24 (2001): 325. [¡Pobre San Miguel de Allende! Pero aquí en la Capital las cosas también andan mal en esa materia [...] los cines están llenos de maricones, particularmente el San Juan de Letrán, el Venecia y el Politeama, sin que las empresas ni la policía puedan hacer nada por impedirlo. La Alameda central continua siendo el lugar favorito de centenares de afeminados y en las calles de Cuauhtemotzín hay varios edificios en que los mismos ocupan numerosas viviendas; se les puede ver de día y de noche como suben y bajan las escaleras, contoneándose y

Two places stand out in the merchant's complaint, the Alameda and Cuauhtemotzín. As will be explained in chapter 2, the first was the main public garden in the city center, and the second, the most famous street in the red zone. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Alameda has been the cruising destination for homosexual men. Since the first years of the Revolution, *Detectives* related, "poor and middle-class queers" gathered at the garden perimeter, mainly next to Hidalgo Avenue, and despite several raids held in 1913 and 1914, meetings continued as "they were very fond of that place, and defied police orders."¹¹³ It is necessary to study Alameda's survival as a site for homosexual encounters, its importance and its codes of coexistence that have developed inside. The reunion and interaction of men of different social classes in this garden is definitely a constant element in the construction of the gay milieu of the capital city during the first half of the twentieth century.

In testimonies of that time, the Alameda, San Juan de Letrán and Cuauhtemotzín often appear as favorable sites for street prostitution. In twentieth century Queer Studies, these same places (except for Cuauhtemotzín) have been described as favorites for "hooking up" [para ligar].¹¹⁴ Men from different social classes identified their homosexual peers at the city center, to start ephemeral relationships, in which buying and selling sex was not always the norm. These sexual exchanges at habitual meeting points helped consolidate social networks that laid the foundations of homosexual culture in the city between 1920 and 1950. It seems impossible to establish, with available evidence, how many men engaged in sexual commerce while wandering along downtown streets; how many went there to "hook up" [ligar]; or how many times both choices merged. The sources, however,

entonando canciones con voz de mujer, polveados y pintarrajeados. Y es curioso que las pecadoras que allí deambulan, fraternizan con ellos, siendo que antes [...] los detestaban y los agredían]

¹¹³ F.L. Bustamante, "El Vicio de la Sodomía en México," *Detectives*, October 5, 1942, no. 527, pp. 14, 18. ["jotos pobres y de clase media"/ "tenían gran amor a aquel sitio y desafiaban los mandatos policiacos"]

¹¹⁴ Reid Eric Gustafson has recently researched on "gay subculture" among the working class in Mexico: "He Loves the Little Ones and Does Not Beat Them: Working Class Masculinity in Mexico City, 1917-1929" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2014), 70-88; Carlos Monsiváis and Renato Leduc, "Los Iguales, los Semejantes, los (Hasta Hace un Minuto) Perfectos Desconocidos (A Cien Años de la Redada de los 41), *Debate Feminista*, vol. 24 (2001): 327.

provide information about Cuauhtemotzín as a place for living and for sexual commerce of men and women.

The publication of Delhumeau's book coincided with the banning of sexual commerce on several streets of the city center. Merchants and neighbors of Cuauhtemotzín requested various authorities to order the eviction of "[female] prostitutes and homosexuals [...] from this forbidden zone" some months after the 1939 decree.¹¹⁵ Men as well as women lived in common buildings and practiced prostitution. Homosexuals attracted other men with words, while dressed "as women" [como mujeres] at times, and in pants and open silk shirts at other times; makeup and wavy hair were frequent. Both genders charged "the same fee," and it seems that men were in great demand. *Detectives* reporter F.L. Bustamante emphasized that they had so many clients "because of ghoulish fascination", which caused some women to complain about unfair competition.¹¹⁶

In another *Detectives* story by Bustamante, he described *acesorias* in the red light district as rooms with women of little beauty, where vulgarity, crime, and bad words reigned. Inside one of the *acesorias* the journalist heard "male voices, but not so manly," so he asked the woman who was accompanying him about the identity of those speaking.¹¹⁷ She identified them as "*los maricas*" [the queer], and explains that they were in charge of house chores and surveillance: aside from making the prostitutes' meals and washing their clothes, they were responsible for keeping these women within the tolerance zone perimeter. These testimonies were meant to create a negative image of homosexuals, to serve certain purposes. On the one hand, Cuauhtemotzín's neighbors wanted to take advantage of the legal climate to throw them out of the neighborhood; on the other, Bustamante was denouncing vice and the exploitation of women in the city. Both views reflect the

¹¹⁵ "Los Suscritos Inquilinos, Comerciantes y Propietarios" (1940), AGN, Fondo: Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río (186), exp. 525.3/1. ["prostitutas y homosexuales [...] de esta zona prohibida"]

¹¹⁶ F.L. Bustamante, "El Vicio de la Sodomía en México," *Detectives*, October 5, 1942, no. 527, pp. 14, 18. ["la misma tarifa"/"por morbosidad"]

¹¹⁷ [voces de hombre, pero no muy hombre]

coincidence of male and female sex workers downtown, and shed light on dynamics worth studying, such as potential conflicts or alliances between those involved in commercial sex, and the socio-cultural duty distribution in the domestic sphere of these neighbors.

The streets, as well as some brothels, provided a space for men and women who prostituted themselves. In his memoirs, Salvador Novo described a tenement run by a waiter downtown on Luis Moya street, which was “a kind of call house for men”.¹¹⁸ One constant visitor was “*Carmen*”, an old longhaired Spanish man, who worked “at a women’s brothel” at night.¹¹⁹ The house at Luis Moya was not the only one owned by a man; although madames dominated the business, a handful of men owned bordellos. One such man was “Manolo Bicicleta,” a homosexual who owned a brothel, frequented “by dozens of *jotos* [faggots] and *souteneurs* [pimps],” where women charged only two pesos per customer.¹²⁰

The closure of brothels filled various pages of the press during the raids that started in 1940, In December of that same year, the deputy chief of Judicial Police, together with several agents, closed down “Rigoberto’s house” [la casa de Rigoberto]. During the operation they arrested the woman in charge—who newspapers identified as the sister of Rigoberto, the owner—as well as men and women who worked in the brothel. In its report, the newspaper *La Prensa* used quotation marks to highlight that the four men arrested worked as “waiters” [meseros]; such typographical tricks were deliberately employed to draw the readers’ attention towards the euphemisms. Later on the newspaper reported that police collected a briefcase with “private accounts of the establishment,” which detailed the money received by the “male and female pupils” for their services.¹²¹ For its part, the newspaper *El Universal* pointed out that “not only women” were found in the house, but “also

¹¹⁸ [una especie de casa de citas masculina]

¹¹⁹ Salvador Novo, *La Estatua de Sal* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008), 151. Italics in the original. [en un burdel de mujeres]

¹²⁰ Salvador Novo, *Nueva Grandeza Mexicana* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1967), 56; F.L. Bustamante, “El Vicio de la Sodomía en México,” *Detectives*, October 5, 1942, no. 527, pp. 14, 18.

¹²¹ “Otros Lenocinios Ya Fueron Clausurados,” *La Prensa*, December 27, 1940, pp. 4, 22. [“contabilidad privada del establecimiento”/ “pupilas y pupilos”]

licitious men who had a similar life to them.”¹²² The deputy chief of police led the raid, as he often did when there was an important closure. However, the closing did not cause scandal in the newspapers: in fact, it was included in an article describing the closure of another brothel, and the headings were not designed to call attention to homosexual prostitution. It is curious that they referred to “Rigoberto’s house,” as if the readers were familiarized either with the place or the owner, whose sexual orientation is not even mentioned.

According to the press, the men and women arrested at Rigoberto’s house were released after the authorities took their statements. The owner, Rigoberto, could not be detained because he was not in the house at the moment the raid was carried out. Inside brothels like Rigoberto’s, homosexual men also engaged in other activities along with sexual commerce. In the streets of the tolerance zone, as well as in brothels, homosexual men handled different jobs within the scope of sexual commerce, from prostitution to brothel management; thus, they could work as guards, porters, barmen, etc. In 1933, a *Detectives* article complained about parents not protecting their daughters from ending up working in cabarets, *accessorias* or dance academies. Parents were blamed for converting women into “prostitutes from all classes that in the past were found in old-style houses, with an owner [madam], a pianist and effeminate men who worked as male chambermaids.”¹²³ Perhaps, these jobs inside brothels allowed customers to approach other men and subtly insinuate their sexual desires. The “waiters” from Rigoberto’s house could come closer to the customers, have discreet talks, furtive caresses or glances, and, afterwards, close a sexual deal quietly. Information about these kind of exchanges is scarce, however, it can be inferred that in closed spaces such as brothels, some men felt freer to express sexual desires that, under other

¹²² “Lenocinios Consignados,” *El Universal*, December 25, 1940, pp. 1, 8. [“no solamente había mujeres sino también libertinos que hacían una vida análoga a la de ellas”]

¹²³ Aldebarán, “Arrojadas Al Fango,” *Detectives*, January 2, 1933, no. 21, pp. 3, 15. [las prostitutas de todas las clases que antes encontrabas en las casas de estilo antiguo, con su dueña, su pianista y los afeminados que hacían de recamareros]

circumstances, they kept to themselves. The transaction was kept private, alcohol flowed in large amounts, and their acquaintances would not doubt their masculinity, since they frequented brothels where women worked—a common practice that was part of the affirmation of virility for men of that time.

In *Memorias de la Bandida* [La Bandida's memoirs], Eduardo Muñuzuri narrated an episode he witnessed as he interviewed the famous madame in her brothel in the early 1960s. A former congressman, close to ex-president Adolfo Ruiz Cortines during the 1930s, was at La Bandida's house. He was clearly drunk, and he directly asked: "Do you have a [*putito*] little faggot [for me] somewhere?"¹²⁴ La Bandida ignored him as if she did not understand what he was saying. Soon after "one of the visiting boys" passed in front of the ex-politician, and he took the opportunity to touch the boy's "bottom"; the young man simply kept walking, "rather alarmed."¹²⁵ Suddenly, the client approached Muñuzuri, who was sitting next to La Bandida, and touched his hair, while telling the madame: "It seems this one is brand new, right [...]? But not even a smile!" To break the moment, La Bandida said ("as if she meant: [he is] a journalist, an untouchable") that Muñuzuri was part of Regino Hernández Llergo's team—the founder of *Siempre!*, one of the most influential weekly magazines of the 1950s. Now aware of the situation, the ex-congressman staggered out of the room.¹²⁶

This anecdote provides elements that might have also been present in the sexual commerce dynamics of previous decades. It is noteworthy, for example, that no one confronted the politician in an aggressive way, neither the two men he touched, or the brothel owner. Moreover, no open disapproval is perceived, either of his request or of his behavior. The politician felt uninhibited enough, thanks to alcohol and the atmosphere of the place, to approach a man whom he had never

¹²⁴ ["¿no tienes por ay [*sic*] un putito?"]

¹²⁵ ["uno de los muchachos que están de visita"/"las nalgas"/"algo alarmado"]

¹²⁶ Eduardo Muñuzuri, *Memorias de la Bandida* (Mexico: Costa-Amic, 1967): 48-49. ["Parece que este es nuevecito, ¿verdad [...] ? ¡Pero ni una sonrisa!" / "como si quisiera decir: [es] un periodista, un intocable"]

seen before and ask if he was “new.” The formulation of that phrase —as well as the attitude when enunciating it— tried to establish Muñuzuri’s complicity in case he was a customer who shared his sexual orientation, or possibly a new brothel worker.

In the same book, *La Bandida* says Cuban leader Fidel Castro Ruz visited her brothel in 1955, when he was in exile. Castro attended the brothel about four times, but the madame did not like him “because he did not spend any money [...] and because he is *maricón* [a fag]... he was after some boys: the Alvarado, whom we have well sussed.”¹²⁷ Throughout the book, *La Bandida* did not hesitate to put her political opinions out in the open; she evidently did not agree with the socialist ideology, and very likely, used homophobic expressions to stress her dislike for Castro. Rather than confirming Castro’s sexual orientation, this anecdote, like the one about the congressman, reveals that inside the brothel, flirting between men could occur with relative freedom. In spite of showing her dislike for the situation, *La Bandida* did not make reference to any sort of punishment imposed on those who displayed their homosexual preferences in her house.

A deeper investigation will be necessary to determine how many mixed prostitution sites existed in the city, as well as the complexity of their internal dynamics. What can be outlined is that, on many occasions, men and women clearly and jointly engaged in sexual commerce; at the same time, they renegotiated house chores and working relationships. The city’s modernity modeled sexual conduct that developed in spaces designed for exclusion; nevertheless, in some cases, the same spaces provided certain liberties. The consequences of this dynamic, such as the confrontations that might have resulted from the renegotiation of gender and of working relationships; the exploitation, as well as the punitive measures imposed by those involved —internally or externally— remain to be studied.

¹²⁷ Eduardo Muñuzuri, *Memorias de la Bandida* (Mexico: Costa-Amic, 1967), 38. [porque no gastaba nada [...] y porque es maricón...andaba tras unos muchachitos: los Alvarado, que los tenemos bien fichados]

Conclusion

Since the beginning, state-sponsored prostitution in Mexico was closely related to international viewpoints on commercial sex. For 80 years, doctors, policymakers, feminists, and politicians discussed ideas about the convenience or futility of controlled prostitution, including European examples as part of their arguments. Often there were contrary stands on the matter, even among the same social group. At first, the containment of venereal disease in the name of public health and public morality served as the major argument to register, enroll, and intern women at the hospital. The failure of the scheme was heavily discussed: the impracticality of maintaining all sex workers under state control, corruption within the system, the lack of client surveillance, and clandestine prostitution. At first, the Mexican revolution did not bring any significant change to the organization of the sex trade. Eventually, the promises of social justice from the state mingled with demands to end women's trafficking and exploitation.

Following the guidelines of the League of Nations, along with the concerns of national security and international participation, the Mexican state suppressed legalized brothels and ended regulated prostitution, as part of its revolutionary agenda. Even when male prostitutes were not included in the regulations, they were an important part of daily life in the tolerance zone and bordellos of the city. Pimps and clients were also overlooked from both the discussion and implementation of the new prohibitions and former regulations. As will be seen in the next chapters, these elements, together with migration, urbanization, and the national rhetoric, will play a central role in the configuration of commercial sex from the 1940s onwards.

Chapter II

Four Vignettes of Vice in Mexico. Spaces of Prostitution in the Capital City

As night falls on one of Mexico City's neighborhoods, a man observes people walking by his side: barefoot people leaving their sweaty footprints on the sidewalks, women wrapped in their black *rebozos* [shawls], men dressed in dirty blue pants. Several women invite the man in from one of the alley's doors. The owner of the place tells him: "Come in, *hijito*, and you'll see the girls with no obligation! Just a little while, you won't regret it." Inside the brothel, some women flirt with him, and although the madame assures him that the service is cheap, and all women are authorized by the Health Inspection Office, he cannot make up his mind. Left alone for a moment, he looks around and finds himself surrounded by old, neglected furniture. An enormous wooden bed, an altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe decorated with paper flowers and candles, and a wardrobe with worn-out mirrors lies behind a half-open door. The brothel owner's voice interrupts his thoughts; impatiently and enthusiastically, she shows him a humbly-dressed young lady —"almost a kid" [casi una niña]: "With this you won't say no [...] What do you think? She's this place's jewel and her name is Clara. Take her! She's better than the ones from the Roma neighborhood! Look!"¹ The man, though attracted to the girl's naked body, detects a hint of nostalgia in her eyes, "maybe of her mother's caresses or perhaps of the broken doll that her sinful little arms embraced not long ago as they now embrace so many men."²

Thus Luis Ángel Rodríguez ends "Flor en el pantano" [Flower in the Slime], the first of the short stories in the 1934 book *Jaulas y Pájaros de Amor. Veinticinco Estampas del Vicio en México* [Birds and Cages of Love. 25 Vignettes of Vice in Mexico]. Rodríguez did not belong to the Mexican

¹ Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Jaulas y Pájaros de Amor. Veinticinco Estampas del Vicio en México* (Toluca: Talleres Tipográficos "La Carpeta," 1934), 14. [¡Entra hijito, verás a las muchachas sin compromiso! Sólo un ratito, no te arrepentirás/ Con esto no dirás que no [...] ¿qué te parece? Es la joya de aquí y se llama Clara ¡Llévatela! ¡Es mejor que las de la colonia Roma! ¡Mira!]

² Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Jaulas y Pájaros de Amor...*, 14. [tal vez de las caricias de su madre o acaso la muñeca rota, que sus bracitos pecadores estrecharon no hace mucho tiempo como hoy estrechan a tantos hombres].

literary canon; neither was he a prolific writer.³ Nonetheless, in *Jaulas y Pájaros...* —in which he asked for “a little mercy” [un poco de piedad] to prostitutes— he shows the reader diverse scenarios and characters related to Mexico City’s sexual commerce during mid-1930s.

In this chapter, Rodríguez’s and other stories will serve as a source and a means to study the complex social and cultural dynamics within and around the places linked to prostitution, particularly those regulated by the state: Morelos Hospital, the zone of tolerance, and brothels and hotels. I will first show the meanings that such spaces had for those inside and outside, by means of the analysis of newspaper articles, legislation, archival documents, judicial cases, memoirs and artistic expressions. To the greatest extent possible, this chapter will rescue the voices of authorities, neighbors, press, clients, madames, pimps and sex workers aiming to contrast their different conceptions of the same place. Morelos Hospital was seen as a rehabilitation center, or a prison; the zone of tolerance or the brothels could represent exploitation centers, work centers or places appropriate for inspiration or liberation from the sexual bonds of family life. Hotels were also perceived either as a vice center or as places that should remain open because they housed *decent* people as well.

Secondly, it will be demonstrated that from 1930 to 1950, the geographical transformations of commercial sex were the result of urban and legal processes that radically changed the organization inside places connected with prostitution and their relation with the city and its dwellers. For decades, brothels (mainly first-class ones) were spaces of homosocial recreation, and were part of the city’s cultural life. They were nevertheless always under fire from social reformers, physicians, authorities and neighbors, owing to the nature of the business. Prostitution in the zone of tolerance

³ Luis Ángel Rodríguez also addressed the topic of prostitution in his novel *Nakeria*. He wrote two historical novels, one about Catalina de Erauso, the Lieutenant Nun, and another about the last days of the government of Moctezuma II, the last Aztec emperor. One of his books entitled *La Ciencia Médica de los Aztecas* (The Medical Science of the Aztecs) caused controversy because it was a translation from an original text in Italian, not an original text as the author has claimed. Aurora Maura Ocampo, *Diccionario de escritores mexicanos, siglo XX* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, 2004), 323.

and street sexual commerce (in which hotels occupied a primary role) also became the target of discussions and changes in regulations regarding sexual commerce and urbanization. The spaces linked to prostitution changed their operational rules due to four factors: population explosion, accelerated urbanization, the influence of the League of Nations' discourse in revolutionary rhetoric, and the changes in the law that banned the ownership of brothels and criminalized procuring.

Towards the end of the 1930s and during the 1940s, the capital city became a battlefield of growing class conflicts, tensions between modernity and tradition, and actions against sexual commerce, including discussions of exploitation, morality and sexuality. Luis Ángel Rodríguez clearly knew these places well, owing to the fact that he was a client of first or second-class brothels, and also knew the prostitutes working in the humble *acesorias* in the red zone of the city.⁴ Rodríguez was a man who belonged to a well-off social class: not only did he write and publish books, he and the prologue-writer of his book made reference to European brothel visits. Nonetheless, he goes along Mexico city streets where mainly members of the working class pass by. The scene that Rodríguez describes was common at a time in which the city was about to start growing rapidly. In the mid-1930s the middle-class shared spaces with the working-class due to the fact they lived and worked in the same neighborhoods. Even though the city started to show as a modern progressive urban center through its architecture and mass media, deep inside its relation with the countryside was close and complex. In “*Flor en el pantano*” barefoot men and women in *rebozos* are the reflections of such interactions.⁵

In the world of prostitution, high-class sexual commerce took place in the Roma neighborhood, west of the city center. This neighborhood was part of Porfirio Díaz's urban planning carried out at

⁴*Acesorias* were single rooms exclusively for sexual commerce. The 1927 Report of the League of Nations translate the term as “one-room huts in which one or two women operate”. Due to the lack of a precise word in English I have decided to use the original word.

⁵ Julia Tuñón, “La Ciudad Actriz: la Imagen Urbana en el Cine Mexicano,” *Historias* 27 (October 1991-March 1992): 190-191.

the beginning of the twentieth century, with the purpose of beautifying and modernizing Mexico City. The buildings started to have European styles, and the spaces became vast, light and airy. The streets began to be filled with sculptures and parks, and the houses had electricity, sewers, and running water.⁶ A few kilometers away, in the center of the city, people lived in slums, where lower-class brothels and cheap hotels abounded. During the first half of the twentieth century wealthier started to move from the center to other neighborhoods, handing the space over to migrants, who, in a few years, quadrupled the capital city's population: from 720,752 in 1910 to 3,050,442 in 1950.

From the 1930s to the 1950s, the crisis in the Mexican countryside, taken over by a handful of independent businessmen, caused many peasants to head towards the city in search of work opportunities offered by factories and construction.⁷ Peasant migration towards Mexico City accounted for 73.5% of demographic growth in the city in those years according to Cristina Sánchez-Mejorada.⁸ As a result, underprivileged people lived in big old houses abandoned by the wealthy, and landlords adapted them so that up to 20 families would fit. This was the birth of the *vecindades* [tenements] that is, places where full families lived in attached one-room houses, sometimes windowless, with doors leading to common-use patios, where one could find laundry sinks, clotheslines, and sometimes bathrooms shared by all the dwellers often in deplorable conditions. In 1956, Oscar Lewis reported that during the day the patios were not only full of people, but also of domestic animals: dogs, turkeys, chickens, hens, birds, and even pigs. The

⁶ During the first half of the twentieth century other Latin American cities, such as Rio de Janeiro, experienced chaotic demographic growth, haphazard urbanization and intense urban reconstruction. Such transformations were heavily contested by city dwellers. See, for example, Teresa Meade, *Civilizing Rio. Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City, 1889-1930* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

⁷ Francisco Alba, *La Población en México. Evolución y Dilemas* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 1977); Hubert Carton de Grammot, "La Desagrarización del Campo Mexicano," *Convergencia. Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 50 (2009): 13-15.

⁸ Cristina Sánchez-Mejorada, *Rezagos de la Modernidad. Memorias de una Ciudad Presente* (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Azcapotzalco, 2005), 171.

surrounding streets were wide and paved, but, unlike the Roma neighborhood, there were no trees, grass or gardens.⁹

The demographic explosion and reorganization of the city involved all social classes in negotiations on land acquisition and space appropriation, which actually intensified spatial segregation during the 1930 to 1950 period. The hostility caused by these changes was reflected in the diverse social and cultural processes of urban life, prostitution among them.¹⁰ When the madame in the story *Jaulas y pájaros...* tells Rodríguez that the young lady was “better” than the women from the Roma neighborhood, there is a marked distinction between the women found in first-class and second-class brothels. Behind that phrase is a clear perception of the brothel’s location and prices, and an effort to compete with elegant call houses by the beauty of the young prostitute, to retain clients who could easily prefer better places.

The last element in “*Flor en el pantano*” that cannot pass unnoticed is the contradiction between the girl’s evident youth and the guarantee that all the girls were registered with the Health Inspection Office. The minimum age required to be registered as a sex worker in the official system of sanitary control was 18 years old. These are elements to be analyzed further: the corruption of the institutions in charge of supervising commercial sex; the methods that sex workers used to skirt the law; the high value of beauty and youth; underage prostitution inside brothels; and the debate between coercion and free will. Luis Ángel Rodríguez’s book is set in 1934, six years before the federal government criminalized living off the prostitution of others and outlawed brothels and call houses. This was a consequence of the debates at the League of Nations against trafficking of women and forceful prostitution, in which the concept of exploitation played a decisive role.

⁹ Oscar Lewis, *Los Hijos de Sánchez. Autobiografía de una Familia Mexicana* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1968), XXIII-XXVII.

¹⁰ An interesting example regarding the tension caused by the appropriation of spaces by the different social groups and its effects on culture and everyday life in the city is that of Anne Rubenstein, “Bodies, Cities, Cinema: Pedro Infante’s Death as Political Spectacle,” in *Fragments of a Golden Age. The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940*, eds. Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein and Eric Zolov (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 200-232.

With the aim of analyzing all these topics, the chapter is organized in five sections: the first four will be dedicated to the spaces registered with the state under the prostitution regulated system: Morelos Hospital, the zone of tolerance, brothels and hotels. The chapter is presented chronologically, as far as possible. The aforementioned processes affected all the sites in the same time period, however, the circumstances that determined the major transformations in each are separated by a few years, so the most crucial junctures settled the order in which each section is presented.

Morelos Hospital

Morelos Hospital was located in the heart of the city, near the Alameda Central, an enormous public garden established at the end of the sixteenth century. Set in a former colonial-era convent building, adjoining the San Juan de Dios church, the hospital treated sex workers who suffered from venereal diseases (See Map 1). The list of ailments attended included syphilis, gonorrhea, venereal granuloma and chancres. Rodríguez preferred to call them “shameful diseases,” [enfermedades vergonzosas] according to custom, although they were also known by other euphemisms such as “secret diseases” [enfermedades secretas] or “blood-related diseases” [enfermedades de la sangre]. During a visit to the hospital, Rodríguez noticed that the patients belonged to the lowest social classes: “[women] who do not have financial resources, nor family, perhaps not even a home.”¹¹ The women either arrived after the compulsory medical checks, if they were registered as prostitutes with the Health Inspection Office, or after having been arrested by the police for practicing sexual commerce illegally. According to Rodríguez, women working at first-class brothels were not in this hospital because health inspectors closed their eyes to “elegant prostitution” [prostitución elegante].¹²

¹¹ “[mujeres] que no tienen recursos, ni familia, tal vez ni hogar”

¹² Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Jaulas y Pájaros de Amor. Veinticinco Estampas del Vicio en México* (Toluca: Talleres Tipográficos “La Carpeta,” 1934), 57.

The writer was also surprised by the patients' youth, ranging from 11 to 20 years old: "at random, I ask them their age [...] they tell me they say they are older, perhaps they are ashamed that they got into the vice so prematurely." On the ground floor of the building Rodríguez found a group of young women occupied with handicrafts. Sewing, hosiery, painting and literacy courses were part of the hospital program that aimed at taking these women away from prostitution. On one of the building walls a sign summed up the intention: "We shall protect the woman's work in which she looks for redemption." While the women studied, Rodríguez felt the air was dense due to the odors given off by the sick bodies. On the way to the top floor, the author could not help looking at the timeworn religious murals on the walls. The only figure he could make out was that of the Virgin holding the corpse of Jesus Christ. Then, his eyes met the recovery ward where sick women were resting: "the rooms are spacious and airy, the beds white and clean, *I just cannot understand the horror all the prostitutes feel towards this place*, except for their freedom, or, to be more precise, their licentiousness; they have food, shelter, care, instruction, I imagine that in their agitated lives, their stay at the Morelos must be an oasis full of tranquility to their hearts." At the end of the story "La sentina" [Bilge Water], the author lamented that once the women were "cured," they would return to the nightclubs, *accesorias*, cheap hotels, and, infected again, they would try to avoid the health police. If they failed, they would come back to Morelos Hospital, "their old home" [la vieja casa de todas].¹³

That "old home" had hosted women suffering from venereal diseases, particularly prostitutes, since 1868, as part of the French System established in Mexico for the purpose of regulating prostitution and avoiding venereal contagion. In the words of historian Fernanda Núñez Becerra: "to speak of prostitution in the nineteenth century means to speak necessarily, and first and

¹³ Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Jaulas y Pájaros de Amor. Veinticinco Estampas del Vicio en México* (Toluca: Talleres Tipográficos "La Carpeta," 1934), 58. [al azar les pregunto sus edades [...] me dicen que se aumentan los años, acaso les da vergüenza haberse lanzado tan prematuramente al vicio]/[Proteja usted el trabajo de la mujer que busca en él su redención]/[las salas son amplias y ventiladas, las camas blancas y limpias, *no me explico el horror que todas las prostitutas tienen a este lugar*, quitando su libertad o más bien su libertinaje allí tienen comida, lecho, curaciones, instrucción, me imagino que en sus vidas agitadas, la permanencia en el Morelos es un oasis de tranquilidad para sus corazones] Italics added.

foremost, about syphilis.”¹⁴ For this reason, it was essential for physicians to identify these women by means of Health Inspection registration, periodical medical check-ups, and long stays in hospital for those who were diagnosed with a venereal ailment. Keeping the women under observation was the only way in which doctors could make certain that prostitutes carefully followed the treatment recommendations and did not have sexual contact during their healing.¹⁵ From the moment the hospital started operating, the hospitalization of prostitutes became synonymous with confinement, and the place itself became equivalent to jail. In addition to this, there was the class stigma associated with this institution. Since the nineteenth century sex workers from different categories had been using diverse techniques to escape being sent to that hospital; for instance, they would attend the medical check-ups during their period, or they would constantly move house. The prostitutes from first-class brothels were more likely to succeed in avoiding confinement, as their madames paid large amounts of money to skip registration and medical inspection, or bribed doctors to report sick women as healthy.¹⁶ As a result, the hospital was full of prostitutes registered or not— who worked in the lowest-class brothels, in *accesorias* and in the streets; the same kind of women Rodríguez observed in 1934.

Morelos Hospital was regarded with disdain by citizens, due to their fear of venereal diseases, and moral prejudice against sex workers, most of all against the poorest women.¹⁷ The hospital represented the last step in the city’s regulatory system, a system that was full of holes through which corruption or illegality snuck in. It is likely that, for example, the girls who told Rodríguez they lied about their age did not do it because of shame, but as a trick so that the officials included them in

¹⁴ [“hablar de prostitución en el siglo XIX es hablar obligadamente y, ante todo, de sífilis”]

¹⁵ Fernanda Núñez Becerra, *La Prostitución y su Represión en la Ciudad de México (siglo XIX). Prácticas y Representaciones* (Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2002), 150-154, 165.

¹⁶ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La Prostitución en México* (Mexico: Librería de la Vda. de Ch. Bouret, 1908), 206-207; Fernanda Núñez Becerra, *La Prostitución y su Represión en la Ciudad de México (siglo XIX). Prácticas y Representaciones* (Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2002), 155 and 159; Alfredo Oviedo Mota, “Carta al Presidente Pascual Ortíz Rubio,” in Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Salud (hereafter AHSS), Fondo: Salubridad Pública, Sección: Servicio Jurídico, Caja: 20.

¹⁷ Fernanda Núñez Becerra, *La Prostitución y su Represión en la Ciudad de México (siglo XIX). Prácticas y Representaciones* (Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2002), 167.

their registry: they affirmed that they were of statutory age and the officials pretended it was true. Andrés Gómez, contributor to *Detectives* magazine, wrote an article in installments, the same year that *Jaulas y pájaros de amor...* was published, in which he narrated his experience living in one of the city's brothels.¹⁸ In June, 1934, Gómez described his visit to the “so rightly despised and loathed” [tan justamente despreciada y odiada] Health Inspection Office, located on the ground floor of Morelos Hospital. According to the journalist, it was well-known that any girl who wanted to get into prostitution rings had to go to the Health Inspection Office in the mornings; once there, after quite a simple procedure, they were entered into the registry.

From Gómez's perspective, physicians and nurses deserved to be respected and admired since they treated the women kindly, while the agents and other staff should be detested for their corruption, as they ignored regulations for bribes, or harassed retired prostitutes if they did not pay a fee.¹⁹ By the end of the 1920s the Chief Doctor of the Health Inspection Office reported to his superiors that women were often taken to police stations by ambulance or non-authorized police agents, where they were forced to have check-ups, given fines, and, sometimes, had their written permissions destroyed.²⁰ There was also the corruption of other departments, like the Urban Police, which committed violations against sex workers while adjudicating functions not authorized by law.

According to Rodríguez and Gómez, Morelos Hospital was a place with comfortable, suitable, and spacious facilities, and the medical staff was capable, devoted and kind; the major problem with the system were the officials of the Health Inspection Office. The sex workers' fear of confinement and the distrust of the Health Inspection Office staff were deeply entrenched and had been for several decades. *Santa* by Federico Gamboa, a novel published in 1903, expressed brothel clients'

¹⁸ *Detectives* was a weekly magazine featuring stories about crime, criminals and vice in the city, published during the 1930's and 1940's. The cover claimed *Detectives* was “el mejor semanario de México” [Mexico's best weekly magazine].

¹⁹ Andrés Gómez, “Siete Días en Casa de Venus,” *Detectives*, 96 (June, 1934), 16.

²⁰ “Respecto a la Policía Urbana”, AHSS, Funds: *Salubridad Pública*, Sección: *Inspección Antivenérea*, Caja: 3, Exp: 7.

lack of understanding of the horrors of Morelos. By the time Rodríguez and Gómez published their writings, the book was a blockbuster about to sell 60,000 copies.²¹

The inspiration to write *Santa* came from Gamboa's enjoyment of Mexico City's nightlife at the end of the nineteenth century. In the novel, Gamboa describes health inspectors as "the lowest rung in the [dirty] administrative ladder," whose functions were to ensure that the "prostitution priestesses complied with a portion of chapters, supposedly directed to safeguard the males' health." Taking advantage of their police power, the inspectors committed "arbitrary acts," "abuse," and "even disgraceful things" against "honest ladies" from whom they extorted money to stave off charges of illegal prostitution.²² From Gamboa's perspective, "the professional prostitutes" could commit as many offenses as they wanted, with illegal payments and bribes greasing the way. In his novel, Gamboa also accuses first-class brothels of breaking the law, for example: when madames paid private doctors for medical check-ups at brothels, although the official regulations stated that they were to be performed only on Morelos Hospital premises.²³

According to Gamboa, these physicians received large amounts of money to always certify prostitutes as healthy. Despite these irregularities, Santa, the most popular woman in the brothel, is admitted to hospital because she, depressed by her mother's death, locked herself in her brothel room during the doctor's visit, causing him to not certify her as "healthy". As a result, two agents appear at the brothel and take her, in spite of being offered money by the brothel-keeper. A Spanish customer, in love with Santa, witnesses the commotion caused by the unexpected action of the agents. When somebody explains what was happening in detail, the customer "could not quite see the importance of it; [he wondered:] what were they alarmed by? ... [but] Pepa [the brothel's

²¹ José Emilio Pacheco, "Santa Cumple Noventa Años," *Inter Medios*, February-April 1993, 7.

²² Federico Gamboa, *Santa* (Mexico: Editorial Grijalbo, 1979), 150. ["arbitrariedades"/"abusos"/"hasta infamias"/"señoritas honestas"]

²³ Federico Gamboa, *Santa...*, 131. ["las profesionales"]

administrator] gave gloomy details, exaggerating, it was jail, the hospital, the confinement, the suffering.”²⁴

The different experiences lived by the prostitutes and their clients with respect to venereal diseases led to underestimation of the fear of the hospital, shown in *Pájaros y jaulas...* by Rodríguez, as well as in Gamboa’s *Santa*. The fear lasted several decades: Gamboa was a writer during the dictatorship brought down by the revolution, while Rodríguez developed his writing when the revolutionary state was still consolidating. The treatment for syphilis during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, with injections and mercury vapors, was as dangerous as the illness itself. With the development of Salvarsan in 1911 by German physician and scientist Paul Ehrlich, doctors and patients around the world had a more effective medication for syphilis. This arsenic-derived treatment, however, had limitations and side effects: it could not be used to treat advanced syphilis, relapse was frequent, treatments were prolonged, and side effects included kidney failure, convulsions, fever, rash, diarrhea, and, in extreme cases, death.²⁵ Evidently, men as well as women had access to treatments with mercury and with Salvarsan, and they both suffered their effects. However, clients of brothels were not compelled to stay in hospital against their will, nor were they socially condemned for sexual contact with prostitutes. As explained in Chapter I, it was during the 1920s and 1930s that doctors and social reformers in Mexico, inspired by debates at the League of Nations, began to question the responsibility of men in venereal contagion. However, forcing the isolation of syphilitic men was not yet an option to contemplate.

Health and public moral were put on the table in those decades, during the debates between officials and doctors defending the French System, and those who criticized it. Those who

²⁴ Federico Gamboa, *Santa...*, 154.. [no le encontró, de pronto, la trascendencia; ¿de qué se alarmaban?...[pero] Pepa [la encargada del burdel] se lo detalló con sombríos colores, cargando la mano, era la cárcel, el hospital, el encierro, el sufrimiento]

²⁵ Fernanda Núñez Becerra, *La Prostitución y su Represión en la Ciudad de México (siglo XIX). Prácticas y Representaciones* (Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2002), 169; Bliss, 100-103; Kent A. Sepkowitz, “One Hundred Years of Salvarsan,” in *The New England Journal of Medicine* 365 (2011): 292-293.

supported state-regulated prostitution claimed registration, inspection, and confinement of sex workers was the most effective method of avoiding the propagation of sexually transmitted diseases, and also of defending “honest” women [mujeres honestas]. Those in favor of the abolition of the French System argued contagion had not been reduced and women had to depend on themselves to save their chastity, and questioned the congruency of the revolutionary state, since it allowed the exploitation of women.²⁶ In the middle of these debates, in February 1926, the government headed by Plutarco Elías Calles enacted what would be the last laws to regulate prostitution in Mexico. The *Reglamento para el Ejercicio de la Prostitución* [Regulations for the Practice of Prostitution] ordinances aimed to impede venereal diseases by means of registration by the Health Inspection Office, the circumscription of sex workers in brothels, call houses and the zone of tolerance, and their isolation in hospital “until the total disappearance of the illness” that caused their admission.²⁷ The action of government towards prostitution had the moral rehabilitation of women through work as its main goal, and Morelos Hospital was the right place to put this logic into practice.

From 1925 to 1928 sanitary authorities conducted an important reform that included hospital premises as well as activities carried out inside. The material reforms included waterproofing, reconstruction of facades, floor replacements, steel columns and beams, refurbishment of shower and steam bathrooms, and renovation of skylights to improve illumination; additionally, rooms that had been used for storage were converted into workshops and classrooms. In the Morelos Hospital activities report, staff assured that the biggest change carried out was the reform “of the patients, in the moral sense.”²⁸ According to this document, literacy courses as well as handicrafts combated the dreadful long hours of idleness sex workers spent inside the hospital that had previously made their

²⁶ This process is explained in detail in Chapter I.

²⁷ “Reglamento para el Ejercicio de la Prostitución,” in *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* 1 and 2 (1926), Article 21. [hasta la desaparición completa de las manifestaciones]

²⁸ “En el Hospital Morelos,” in *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* 3 (1928): 133, 139, 144. [en el sentido moral, de las enfermas]

stay “absolutely unbearable.”²⁹ On January 1, 1926, the newspaper *El Universal* reported that reforms had been so radical that the Health Department wanted to hold an opening ceremony in November 1925, with President Plutarco Elías Calles as the guest of honor. The newspaper offered the following subheading: “Before, a house of misery and humiliation, now it is a great workshop where the woman is dignified by an honest job.”³⁰ The classrooms depicted by Rodríguez in “*La sentina*,” as well as the sign that he read on one of its walls, were the result of these changes. However, for the prostitutes, their stay at the hospital was not the “oasis of tranquility” that Rodríguez imagined.

It is true that repairs within Morelos Hospital were intended to improve the patients’ stay there, as well as the staff’s working conditions. Sanitary authorities followed the recommendations of the modern hygiene guidelines of the time. During the second half of the nineteenth century the majority of the testimonies report the terrible conditions of the premises as a result of administrative and economic problems. No matter how well-intentioned medical staff were, the facilities were poor and the treatments painful. The lack of antibiotics prevented the patients’ definitive cure.³¹ The 1925 transformations meant a radical change for the doctors and the government. Sex workers still refused to be taken into the hospital, and sometimes expressed their discontent by exposing deficiencies in regulations and reforms. Only three months after the grand opening ceremony, three sex workers sent a letter to the president explaining that the health inspector used the regulations to charge fees that neither they, nor the owners of brothels, hotels or *acessorias* were able to cover. According to the women signing the document, Health Inspection agents used Morelos Hospital as a coercion method. If women resisted paying for the record books in which doctors confirmed their health, they were arrested and consigned to hospital, to be released only after covering the cost of

²⁹ “En el Hospital...” 139. [verdaderamente insoportable]

³⁰ “El Hospital Morelos ha Quedado Convertido en una Institución Industrial Nueva y Bien Instalada,” *El Universal*, January 1, 1926, p. 8, Section 4. [Antes, una casa de miseria y de humillación, ahora es un gran taller donde se dignifica a la mujer con un trabajo honesto]

³¹ Fernanda Núñez Becerra, *La Prostitución y su Represión en la Ciudad de México (siglo XIX). Prácticas y Representaciones* (Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2002), 160.

the book. In their complaint, the women claimed their lack of money meant they had to sell their clothes, and that they went out into the streets “almost naked” [casi desnudas]. With the money they gathered, they returned to the health inspector’s office to make the payment.³² The 1926 regulations stipulated that registration, record books and necessary photographs would be obtained or renewed for free; in the event of loss there would be a fee of one peso for replacement.³³ The letter is an indicator of not only the mismanagement the Health Inspection Office was constantly accused of, but also sheds light on what the hospital meant for sex workers: a method of coercion, a punishment, and a prison.

According to Rodríguez, the classes and workshops lasted around 30 days, being the average time the women stayed there. During that time, prostitutes were kept away from their daily routines, their source of income and even their families. If we take into account possible recidivism, prostitutes could be confined in Morelos for months, which meant economic loss in addition to emotional exhaustion. In their letter to the president, sex workers Ángela de los Monteros, Emma Zaldívar and “Josefina” use their nudity to highlight the Inspection Office as the one committing immoral acts, not the brothel and hotel owners, and even themselves, since they complied with regulations. They told how the internees of the recently reopened Morelos Hospital had been thrown into the streets because the number of beds was insufficient, which implied assigning three women to the same bed. The 1925-1928 records of the hospital activities have a different version of these facts. In 1926 the hospital received more patients than in previous years. Due to the fact there were only 350 beds in this place, staff accommodated two women in each, which is why doctors requested the Health Inspection Office to stop sending patients “until the premises had no more

³² Ángela de los Monteros, Emma Saldívar y Josefina, “Al C. Presidente de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos”, (1926) AHSS, Fondo: *Salubridad Pública*, Sección: *Inspección Antivenérea*, Caja: 3, Exp: 2.

³³ “Reglamento para el Ejercicio de la Prostitución,” in *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* 1 and 2 (1926): 166-167, chapter III.

overcrowding.”³⁴ This situation must have worsened the opinion sex workers had of the hospital, since reforms did not translate into immediate benefits, as the press or authorities assured they would. In addition to this, the stay was not free of charge: every patient had to pay a daily amount of 3 pesos and 30 cents that covered medical attention, food and accommodation; surgery was an extra 22 pesos. The women, confined as they were, could not work to afford such fees. By the end of 1926, the year that brought great renovations to Morelos Hospital, the interneers faced a new provision: the director of the institution banned “FIRMLY AND UNEQUIVOCALLY” sex workers’ children from staying with their mothers in hospital.³⁵ Although the director’s order might have been a hygienic measure with the objective of avoiding contagion and overcrowding, for the interneers it meant having to abandon their children “in the street, to the arms of generous people or people [they] trusted,” for weeks. Also in the letter, the five women who signed it declared that “The league in defense of the fallen woman” [La Liga de la Defensa de la Mujer Caída] was forming, with the aim of informing about the damage the new regulations had caused.³⁶ Sources do not provide evidence of the organization being formed, but there are few documents of sex workers’ opinion on the hospital, and their posture in them is always that of opposition and resistance.

Fourteen years after these important reforms prostitution was no longer regulated by the State in Mexico City. As a consequence, Morelos Hospital, cornerstone of the French System, stopped servicing only women devoted to sexual commerce. Nonetheless, the prostitutes working in the streets or in illegal places continued to be the main patients due to police raids, which actually increased. In December 1943 the hospital started to admit men and children, some affected by syphilis, and opened a new space for obstetric services; “the main officials and their wives accepted

³⁴ “En el Hospital...,” 134. [hasta descongestionar el establecimiento]

³⁵ Las mujeres sin hogar, “C. Presidente de la República,” AHSS, Fondo: *Salubridad Pública*, Sección: *Inspección Antivenérea*, Caja: 3, Exp: 4. [de UNA MANERA ROTUNDA Y TERMINANTE] Emphasis in the original.

³⁶ [en la vía pública a personas caritativas o a personas de nuestra confianza]

to sponsor the new facilities.”³⁷ Despite the authorities’ enthusiasm, the press noted the building was old and unsuitable: “an old convent, semi-destroyed and badly adapted to the functions it must serve.”³⁸ Some internees told María Elena Sodi de Pallares, contributor to *El Universal*, that in spite of the practical knowledge obtained when in hospital, it was hard for them to find a job once released, which is why they felt forced to work in prostitution rings again, prolonging the contagion cycle. During their confinement, many women did not have basic cleaning items such as combs, brushes or handkerchiefs, and one staff member told the journalist that many patients possessed only the clothes they were wearing the day they entered the hospital.³⁹

A couple of months later, Morelos Hospital director told the press that “a scientific revolution” [una revolución científica] would soon start to be applied, which would actually heal the “terrible” venereal “ailment” [el terrible padecimiento venéreo] quickly and efficiently. On a trip to the United States, doctor Alfonso Segura Albiter witnessed the benefits of the recently discovered penicillin in the treatment for syphilis as well as for gonorrhoea.⁴⁰ Unlike Salvarsan, penicillin was 100% effective in treating syphilis in any of its clinical stages, and considerably reduced not only the healing time, but also the side effects. For the first time, doctors from all over Mexico —and around the world— could effectively fight this old menace to public health. Undoubtedly, both the end of state regulations of prostitution and scientific advancements in the treatment of venereal diseases brought a change to the hospital functions. At the beginning of the 1950s it specialized in gynecology/obstetrics and oncology, and in 1957 it began to be known as el Hospital de la Mujer

³⁷ “Se transforma el Hospital Morelos,” *El Universal*, December 13, 1943, 11. [los principales funcionarios del ramo y sus señoras esposas aceptaron ser madrinas del nuevo establecimiento]

³⁸ “Se transforma el Hospital Morelos,” 1,11; Elena Sodi de Pallares, “Impera la Inmoralidad en el Hospital Morelos,” *El Universal*, December 28, 1943, 7,11. [un antiguo convento semiderruido y mal adaptado a las funciones que debe llenar]

³⁹ Elena Sodi de Pallares, “Impera la Inmoralidad en el Hospital Morelos,” *El Universal*, December 28, 1943, 11.

⁴⁰ “Terrible Padecimiento es Curado ya Hasta en un Día,” *El Universal*, February 17, 1944, 5.

[Women's Hospital].⁴¹ Perhaps these changes and, specifically, leaving the building at 42 Avenida Hidalgo contributed to the disappearance of the stigma once associated with the hospital. Nonetheless, moral panic concerning sexual commerce did not diminish much. New and old discourse merged in the 1940s, and made prostitutes and brothel-keepers appear as an obstacle for the territorial and moral expansion of the city.



Figure 2. Registration, Inspection and Incarceration were the three principles of the French System. In Mexico City, the Morelos Hospital was in charge of the treatment of sex workers that suffered from venereal disease. During the last years of prostitution regulated by the State, those who advocate for regulation tried to transform the Hospital into an institution that could teach prostitutes certain skills in order to encourage them to leave sex trade. For sex workers (some of them very young as can be seen on the image) reclusion was experienced as a punishment and they tried to avoid it at all costs. *Prostitutas en Sala del Hospital Morelos*, (Prostitutes in a Room at Morelos Hospital), Fondo Casasola, Fototeca Nacional, Mexico City, Número de Inventario 5734, ca. 1925.

⁴¹ The full name of the hospital in 1957 was: *Hospital de la Mujer Dr. Jesús Alemán Pérez* (Women's Hospital Dr. Jesús Alemán Pérez). However, even nowadays, it is simply known as Women's Hospital. <<http://www.hdelamujer.salud.gob.mx/historia1.html>>, accessed on June 26, 2014.

Tolerance Zone

In the short story called “El Callejón del Ave María” [Ave María Alley], Rodríguez portrays one of the streets that were part of the tolerance zone in the 1930s. Located just 650 meters from the Zócalo or *Plaza Mayor* —that is, the main square of the center of Mexico City— the alley was mostly occupied by *accesorias* (the single rooms where prostitutes worked), differentiated by numbers or letters: “A”, “B”, etc. In the mornings, according to Rodríguez’s story, the doors were “sealed as a tomb” [cerradas como tumbas], and the alley remained “silent, peaceful, quiet” [silencioso, tranquilo, quieto] as pedestrians —say a woman carrying a basket heading to San Antonio Abad market— walked by. The bells of a church nearby tolled to indicate it was noon. A woman left one of the rooms, wearing a pair of worn-out slippers. Her appearance was that of a “harpy with Medusa’s head on her shoulders.” She banged on the “flimsy” door of one of her neighbors as she shouted all kinds of insults. Once peace was interrupted, several women “show their messy heads through the windows, with sunken eyes, a court of specters.”⁴²

The activity in the alley started immediately; feather dusters and brooms shook, producing dust clouds, while women emptied the buckets of filthy water by the sidewalks. The woman who woke up all her neighbors kept swearing until Matilde, “the veteran lover of all Mexico and boss of them all” left her *accesoria* and ordered her to close her mouth. The other woman, “as gentle as a lamb,” obeyed her and went back into her room. Matilde was famous for having sexual intercourse with several men at the same time. In Rodríguez’s words, she “beat[s] the record of prostitution in Mexico [...] three or four men is child’s play to her.” When a new client arrived at her *accesoria* she “hid” [escondía] another behind a folding screen, made another one jump out of the window, while

⁴² Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Jaulas y Pájaros de Amor. Veinticinco Estampas del Vicio en México* (Toluca: Talleres Tipográficos “La Carpeta,” 1934), 15. [“una arpía que lleva sobre los hombros la cabeza de medusa”/ “la endeble” puerta/ “asoman cabezas despeinadas en los ventanillos, ojos hundidos, una corte de espectros”]

one more was forced to hide under the bed. At dusk, in their *accesorias*, the rest of the women prepared to attract, negotiate with, and receive customers. Rodríguez concludes the second vignette in his book stating that “the mystery of deep, great, vivifying and noble love drowns in those pigpens like an accursed sterile germ.”⁴³

According to chronicler Armando Jiménez, Ave María Alley was 100 meters long and 6.5 meters wide. Over that distance a dairy store, a charcoal store, and a small grocery shared the space with 60 rooms, each of which housed one or two women living and practicing prostitution, charging, on average, 50 cents per customer. Around 90 women worked on that street, the most famous being Matilde Rivas, who lived in *accesoria* number 4. Since she was very tall and corpulent, she earned the nickname “la matildona.”⁴⁴ Comedians, poets, journalists, and writers paid tribute to her, either mentioning her in sketches and publications, or dedicating a creation to her: poet and painter Pedro Rendón wrote her a poem, popular actor and composer Joaquín Pardavé wrote her a song, and famous bullfighter Pepe Ortiz dedicated a performance to her.⁴⁵ *Accesoria* number 4 on Ave María alley attracted the attention of international characters such as Joaquín Belda, a prolific writer devoted almost exclusively to popular erotic novels. In his work *El Fifi de Plateros* (The Elegant Man of Plateros Street) —written and published during the five months he lived in Mexico— Belda

⁴³ Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Janlas y Pájaros de Amor. Veinticinco Estampas del Vicio en México* (Toluca: Talleres Tipográficos “La Carpeta,” 1934), 15-16. [“la veterana del amor en México y jefe de todas” sale de su accesoria y le ordena que se calle. La otra mujer obedece “como un manso corderillo”/“bat[ía] el récord de la prostitución en México [...] tres o cuatro hombres para ella son un juego de niños”/“el misterio del amor profundo y grande, vivificador y noble, se ahoga en esas pocilgas como un germen estéril y maldito”]

⁴⁴ Armando Jiménez, *Lugares de gozo, retozo, abogo y desabogo en la Ciudad de México. Cantinas, Pulquerías, Hoteles de Rato, Sitios de Prostitución, Cárcels* (Mexico: Editorial Océano, 2000), 212.

⁴⁵ Armando Jiménez, *Lugares de gozo, retozo, abogo y desabogo en la Ciudad de México. Cantinas, Pulquerías, Hoteles de Rato, Sitios de Prostitución, Cárcels* (Mexico: Editorial Océano, 2000), 211-221. *La matildona* was also known as Matilde Crespo or Felicitas Larrauri. According to Jiménez, among the clients or men who paid tribute to her was comedian Leopoldo Berinstáin, cartoonist “El Chango,” Ernesto García Cabral, or politician César Garizurieta, author of one of the most famous quotes of Mexican politics: “Vivir fuera del presupuesto es vivir en el error” (to ignore the budget is to be in error). The chronicler also assures that *la matildona*’s popularity was such that, at that time, any person who was tall and corpulent received the same nickname: “matildona.”

includes a passage in which he suggests the abilities *la matildona* had: pleasing two men at once, while another customer was waiting his turn inside the room.⁴⁶

In Belda's novel, two young men, one of them Spanish, the other Mexican, visit *la matildona*. The latter has invited his foreign friend to Mexico City, and, as part of the tour, he takes him to Ave María Alley to experience Matilde Rivas. These characters were very likely inspired by real people that experienced Mexico City's tolerance zone as a recreational site they could share with friends and foreign mates. *La matildona* reached the status of a tourist attraction herself. Russian screenwriter and director Sergei Eisenstein, who visited Mexico between 1930 and 1932 for a film project called *¡Que Viva México!*, described *la matildona* in his book *Yo. Memorias Inmorales* [Immoral Memories: An Autobiography] as "a flexible mass of bones and flesh [...] Mexico's attraction like the pyramids and the cathedral, the snowy peak of the Pico de Orizaba, the jails flooded by the sea in Veracruz, Chapultepec Castle, and Tlamanalco's Bleeding Christ," "living giant [...] symbol of sexual initiation" of generations of young people "since time immemorial."⁴⁷ During his stay in Mexico, the director of *Battleship Potemkin* spent time with different members of the Mexican intelligentsia, such as the literary group the *Contemporáneos*. In their magazine, named after the group itself, Eisenstein contributed illustrations of different places and people, including caricatures of *la matildona*.⁴⁸ It is highly probable that they introduced Eisenstein to the world of prostitution in Mexico.

⁴⁶ The brief passage in Belda's book in which he mentions *la matildona* has been transcribed in Armando Jiménez, *Lugares de gozo, retozo, abogo y desabogo en la Ciudad de México. Cantinas, Pulquerías, Hoteles de Rato, Sitios de Prostitución, Cárceles* (Mexico: Editorial Océano, 2000), 218-220.

⁴⁷ Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Yo. Memorias Inmorales* (Mexico, Siglo XXI Editores, 1991), 13. [una mole de huesos y carne flexible [...] atractivo de México similar a las pirámides y a la catedral, a la cumbre nevada del Pico de Orizaba, a las cárceles inundadas por el mar de Veracruz, al Castillo de Chapultepec y al ensangrentado Cristo de Tlamanalco], "coloso viviente [...] símbolo de la iniciación [sexual]" de generaciones de jóvenes "desde tiempos inmemoriales"

⁴⁸ Armando Jiménez, *Lugares de gozo, retozo, abogo y desabogo en la Ciudad de México. Cantinas, Pulquerías, Hoteles de Rato, Sitios de Prostitución, Cárceles* (Mexico: Editorial Océano, 2000), 218. Two works that illustrate Eisenstein's life in Mexico and his unfinished project *¡Que Viva México!*, as well as his intellectual relations are: Masha Salaskina, *In Excess. Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2009), and Julia Tuñón, "Sergei Eisenstein en México: Recuento de una Experiencia," *Historias* 55 (2003): 23-39. Among the most outstanding members of the *Contemporáneos* group were: Jorge Cuesta, Salvador Novo, José Gorostiza, Roberto Montenegro, Gilberto Owen, Jaime Torres Bodet, Xavier Villaurrutia and Antonieta Rivas Mercado.

In his memoirs, the Russian director locates the *acesoria* of *la matildona* “within the noisy neighborhood with marquees and prostitutes in Guautemotzin [*sic*] Street,”⁴⁹ a street that was like “a spinal cord [...] with its branch lines, the alleys [...] the center of prostitution in Mexico City.”⁵⁰ In fact, Eisenstein referred to Cuauhtemotzín, the street named after the last Aztec emperor, and located very close to Ave María Alley. In the zone known as the first square of Mexico City is the *Plaza Mayor*, where Spanish conquerors erected the political-religious center of colonial times over the ruins of a similar center from the conquest period. Surrounding the government buildings and the metropolitan cathedral were numerous streets that had become occupied by *acesorias*, brothels and love hotels, all of different categories, since the end of the nineteenth century. The zone — eventually known as the *Barrio Latino* [Latin Neighborhood]— included streets that became synonymous with prostitution despite the fact that people or families dedicated to other activities lived there too.⁵¹

The emblematic streets of sexual commerce during the first half of the twentieth century were, of course, Cuauhtemotzín and Ave María Alley, but also Órgano Street, Rayón Street, López Street, and Nava Alley (See Map 1). In these streets and their surroundings, besides national or foreign prostitutes, madames and pimps, working class people lived or passed by, as well as housewives, chorus girls, tourists, journalists, literary persons and painters. Additional neighbors included teachers and students of the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria* and the *Universidad Nacional*, located three blocks away from the *Plaza Mayor*, as well as composers, singers, comedians, and actors who worked

⁴⁹ Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Yo...*, 13. In Mexico, “carpas” [marquees] were known as a particular type of theatrical show held in detachable structures, like the ones for the circus, where comedy, music, and dance shows, catalogued as Variety Theater, were put on. [“en el ruidoso barrio de carpas y prostitutas de la calle Guautemotzin [*sic*]”].⁴⁹ Una calle que semejaba “una médula espinal [...] con sus ramales los callejones [...] el centro de la prostitución de la ciudad de México”]

⁵⁰ Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Yo...*, 12.

⁵¹ Armando Jiménez, *Lugares de gozo...*, 198-223. According to Jiménez, the nickname of *Barrio Latino* [Latin Neighborhood] originated from the fact that a play entitled “El Barrio Latino” was released at the Colón Theater in 1919, and from that moment the red zone of the city started to be called as such.

in marquees or at popular radio station XEW, which had its golden age between 1935 and 1945.⁵² Prominent Mexican culture figures frequented the tolerance zone and dedicated some of their works to the persons or places within. Such figures included painters Julio Ruelas and José Clemente Orozco, who depicted brothel scenes from the beginning of the century; and philosopher/presidential candidate José Vasconcelos, who recorded his sexual encounters — blessing the women for offering pleasure with no fatherhood obligation—, in his autobiographic book *El Ulises Criollo*. Agustín Lara, popularly known as the musician-poet [el músico poeta] XEW star, authored numerous songs praising sex workers, which were used as soundtracks for movies from the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (1935-1955). Photojournalist Nacho López, captured diverse city figures including street prostitutes in his work. As mentioned above, the city's tolerance zone also caught the attention of foreign artists: Henri Cartier-Bresson could not help taking photographs to the women of Cuauhtemotzín Street during his visit to Mexico in 1934.⁵³

Eventually, the different groups living, working, or spending free time in the city center witnessed the dismantling of the surrounding area as a result of urban planning policies for the capital. Urbanization plans to organize the “anarchic and exorbitant” [anárquico y desorbitado] growth of the city and turn it into a modern metropolis included street paving, sidewalk construction, a new plumbing system, drain system, and lighting, as well as street-broadening and opening new routes for urban transport. From the mid-1930s up to the late 1950s, different governments had great avenues constructed on central streets where sexual commerce was inevitably carried out. Legal agreements that backed the planning of new traffic arteries were passed during Lázaro Cárdenas's six-year presidential term (1934-1940), and were adjusted during the

⁵² Sergio González Rodríguez, *Los Bajos Fondos* (Mexico: Cal y Arena, 1988), 54-55.

⁵³ In regard to Julios Ruelas's and José Clemente Orozco's paintings see Adriana Zavala, *Becoming Modern Becoming Tradition. Women, Gender, and Representation in Mexican Art* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2010); also see José Vasconcelos, *El Ulises Criollo* (Mexico: Editorial Botas, 1959). I thank Fernanda Núñez Becerra for giving me access to her unpublished manuscript “Mujeres Públicas y Consumidores Privados: los Clientes, esos Desconocidos,” (2014).

administrations of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946) and Miguel Alemán (1946-1952).⁵⁴ During those years, great works were conducted, with the aim of facilitating access to different parts of the city, and some downtown streets were broadened so as to clear the traffic there. Putting these urban policies into practice resulted in conflicts between authorities, owners, tenants, and regular pedestrians, particularly from the zone known as the first square and the surrounding area, which had the most dwellers per square kilometer by 1940.⁵⁵

The broadening of roads connecting the city's different areas not only affected women who worked in prostitution places, but also seriously affected second and third-class sexual commerce due to their strategic position. Although properties in streets like Cuauhtemotzín, Órgano, López and Ave María Alley had been destined for sex trade since the last years of the nineteenth century, their presence constantly bothered neighbors and passers-by.⁵⁶ Such annoyances grew, together with the proliferation of prostitution in the city. Brothels, call houses and *accesorias* multiplied rapidly, just as the population rose: in 1918 the Health Inspection Office reported 65 brothels and first, second, third and lowest-class assignation houses, as well as 60 "isolated" [aisladas] prostitutes who worked in love hotels or *accesorias*. By 1927, research conducted by the League of Nations determined there were 250 places where prostitution was practiced, including hotels and *accesorias*. Eleven years later, in 1938, the Health Inspection Office had a registry of around 400 brothels, assignation houses and *accesorias*. This was an increase of over 500% in 20 years: 335 more properties used for sexual commerce than existed in 1918, not including love hotels, clandestine brothels or illegal sex workers.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Cristina Sánchez-Mejorada, *Rezagos de la Modernidad. Memorias de una Ciudad Presente*. Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Azcapotzalco, 2005, 275-283.

⁵⁵ Cristina Sánchez-Mejorada, *Rezagos...*, 173.

⁵⁶ Armando Jiménez, *Lugares de gozo...*, 198-223.

⁵⁷ Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (hereafter AHDF), "El Inspector de Sanidad Solicita se le Proporcione una Lista de los Prostíbulos que Existen en esta Capital" (1918), Fondo: *Ayuntamiento del Distrito Federal*, Sección: *Sanidad*, Vol. 3891, Exp: 34; League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children. Part Two* (Geneva: Publications of the League of Nations, 1927), 119; Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), "Registro de Casas

In this context the first big change to the map of the city's sexual commerce took place in 1934, when city's authorities ordered the demolition of the *accesorias* in Ave María Alley to give way to 20 de Noviembre Avenue. As stated in Armando Jiménez's chronicles, this decision led to protests by artists and intellectuals. On one hand, historians complained about the damage the colonial patrimony would suffer, whereas others supported the sex workers' angry protests. Nonetheless, the work continued and prostitutes had to leave their *accesorias*. Some used a truck hired by *la matildona* to carry their belongings to their new homes.⁵⁸ Probably, many moved to nearby streets, where they could carry on working. However, authorities did not stop efforts to broaden the streets of the city center, and tension between neighbors and prostitutes continued. In 1938, city authorities attempted to eliminate prostitution from the zone of the first city square. In spite of the prostitutes' protests and their search for legal protection, the Supreme Court of Justice determined Mexico City's government was authorized to use public force to remove the women on Cuauhtemotzín and neighboring streets. The decision was based on Article 27 of the Constitution, which legalized private expropriation for public utility and social interest ends.⁵⁹ The argument that had the biggest impact on the media was the one related to morals. Several newspapers argued that brothels and *accesorias* were located in a high traffic territory of cars, public transport, "decent people," "workers from both genders, and under aged people," and near residential areas, schools, and important road links, "which works to the disadvantage of the city's good men, as well as to public morals."⁶⁰

In May 1939, the head of the Public Health Department put a notice in the main newspapers that established the boundaries within which sexual commerce could not be carried out. The ban included practically all of downtown except for a designated area: "out of there it is a free zone [...]"

de Citas y Casas de Asignación Registradas en el Departamento Antivenéreo de Salubridad Pública," Fondo: *Secretaría de Gobernación*, Caja: 442, Exp: 8.

⁵⁸ Armando Jiménez, *Lugares de gozo...*, 214-215.

⁵⁹ Cristina Sánchez-Mejorada, *Rezagos...*, 234.

⁶⁰ Renato D'Herblay, "Mercado de Carne Humana," in *Detectives*, April 12, 1937, 28-29; "Serán Expulsadas de Cuauhtemotzín," *Excelsior*, October 16, 1938; "Desapareció la Zona Roja," *El Universal*, March 19, 1939, 1 and 7.

for the establishment of assignation houses, call houses, authorized hotels, etc.”⁶¹ Some days before, the press had described the eviction of around 1,500 women from brothels and *accesorias* on Cuauhtemotzín Street and neighboring alleys, for which 150 policemen were required, although no clashes were reported.⁶² Some months after that, the authorities demolished the street to build Fray Servando Teresa de Mier Avenue. Nevertheless, sexual commerce in the area was far from disappearing: the lack of a tolerance zone resulted in a rise in prostitution in other streets. The fall in the number of *accesorias* increased prostitution in dance halls, cabarets and love hotels, causing greater tension between sex workers and neighbors, who, in most of their complaints, identified as fathers and mothers worried about their families’ wellbeing. The situation worsened months later: from January 1940, the federal government banned the ownership of any kind of facilities for prostitution, thus more women went out to work in the streets. Some prostitutes complained about corruption and ill treatment from police agents, however, due to the absence of a tolerance zone they requested that authorities grant them permission to work in the streets “so as to be able to earn a living, something everyone has the right to.” The answer to their request was always negative, under the argument that prohibition had been a measure undertaken in the public’s interests.⁶³

Civil organizations and parents wanted prostitutes to be removed from the streets either by allowing them to return to their *accesorias* or by establishing a tolerance zone “in a place away from the city and isolated from residential areas where children and good people abound.”⁶⁴ Apparently authorities were in agreement with some of the neighbors regarding this second point, and proposed

⁶¹ Biblioteca Lerdo, Sección: *Recortes*, “Aviso al Público,” *El Nacional*, May 25, 1939. [“gente decente”/“obreros de ambos sexos y menores”/“lo que redundará en perjuicio del buen nombre de la ciudad así como de la moral pública”]

⁶² “Supresión de las Zonas de Tolerancia: Fueron Clausuradas las Accesorias a Todas sus Habitantes en los Barrios Más Populosos y Tradicionales de la Ciudad,” *El Nacional*, May 19, 1939, 1, *Segunda Sección*; “Desapareció la Zona Roja,” *El Universal*, March 19, 1939, 1 and 7. [fuera de allí es zona permitida [...] para el establecimiento de casas de asignación, de citas, hoteles autorizados, etc]

⁶³ AGN, Gloria Mendoza et al., “La Suscrita en Unión de Varias Compañeras que nos Buscamos la Vida” (1940), Fondo: *Presidentes*, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río (186), Exp: 525. [para poder buscarnos la vida, a la que tenemos derecho].

⁶⁴ “Están Regresando a sus Accesorias Ya,” *El Nacional*, May 30, 1939, 8. [en un lugar apartado de la ciudad y aislado de las zonas residenciales donde abundan criaturas y gente de bien]

a new tolerance zone near the Spanish Cemetery, by San Bartolo Naucalpan Road, which was then located to the northeast, very close to the city boundaries. Sex workers rejected this proposal since it would be discouraging for clients to look for them in such a faraway place, and the area lacked basic services such as lighting, residences or markets.⁶⁵ Fourteen months after the 1939 decree, a group of “tenants, merchants and owners” [inquilinos, comerciantes y propietarios] from the Cuauhtemotzín neighborhood claimed that despite the authorities’ efforts to get rid of the tolerance zone, it still existed, worse than before, because women now stood in front of hotels, invading sidewalks with chairs. In their letter they claimed that cheap hotels, clandestine brothels, and prostitutes caused a “shameful spectacle,” while ruining the “new appearance” the street was acquiring as new businesses established there and the “honest working class” occupied houses for which they paid “reasonable rents.”⁶⁶ The press echoed these complaints, reporting that prostitutes were returning to “the same place, old scenario of their depraved life,” although not to the same premises but to hotels near 20 de Noviembre Avenue. The sex workers’ “unbearable scandals” affected the initiative of businessmen that had established “new businesses and important entertainment centers.”⁶⁷

The changes in the use of urban land, together with the population’s rapid growth, also affected the neighbors that complained about the constant presence of sex workers. The boom of commerce, industry, and new construction resulted in arbitrary rent increases, creating a situation that benefited landlords more than tenants.⁶⁸ The lack of control was such that the government decreed a “freezing” policy [política de congelación] in 1942 that made it impossible, for decades, to vary rent

⁶⁵ “Profilaxis de Hoteles y Cabarets,” *La Prensa*, March 30, 1940, 10; “Mueven su Influencia para No Clausurarse Hoteles y Cabarets,” *La Prensa*, April 15, 1940, 2 and 12.

⁶⁶ AGN, “Los Suscritos Inquilinos, Comerciantes y Propietarios” (1940), Fondo: *Presidentes*, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río (186), Exp: 525. [“bochornoso espectáculo”/“nuevo aspecto”/“honrada clase trabajadora” /“rentas módicas”]

⁶⁷ “La Fuerza de la Tradición,” *La Prensa*, October 12, 1940, 9. [“al mismo rumbo, viejo escenario de su vida depravada”/ “escándalos insoportables” /“nuevos comercios e importantes centros de espectáculos”]

⁶⁸ Cristina Sánchez-Mejorada, *Rezagos...*, 2005, 216.

prices in several areas of the city.⁶⁹ It is necessary to conduct a deeper analysis to find the repercussions of such circumstances on the different groups that lived or worked in the center. In 1940, Cuauhtemotzín residents complained about the rise in rent, which they described as “prohibitive” [inaccesibles]. “Working families” [familias trabajadoras] that had to “resign” [resignarse] themselves to living in the heart of the tolerance zone, as the rent prices were low and the location close to their workplaces, had to ask the “rich owner” [rico propietario] to build houses for the working class “that has given him a lot through the payment of their rents.”⁷⁰ In the newspaper *La Prensa*, a group of neighbors claimed that as *accesorias* disappeared, the land owners had rushed into building apartment blocks, and for each apartment they charged a hundred pesos or more, thus, the houses for which tenants paid 25 pesos a month disappeared. In this sense, it is important to mention that before the eviction of Cuauhtemotzín, some reporters had mentioned the “fabulous amounts” [cantidades fabulosas] that owners of *accesorias* received since each of the sex workers paid a daily rental fee.

The last *accesorias* in the city were the ones at Órgano Alley, and in 1965 the city government evicted them and demolished 60% of the *accesorias* to build a market. In the early 1970s, prostitutes still working in the area gradually abandoned their increasingly run-down properties, and Órgano and Rayón Streets disappeared to give way to Eje 1 Norte Avenue. It is likely that the rooms that disappeared contained the same furniture they had in the 1930s and 1940s: a wardrobe, a chair, and a bed, and two hooks on the wall for customers to hang their clothes. Two buckets of water and a pewter bowl were enough for the clients’ and sex workers’ hygiene. The bathrooms were located

⁶⁹ The “rentas congeladas” decree lasted up to the 1990s, and contributed to the deterioration of many properties in the zone known today as the historical center. As time went by, the money obtained from rents was not enough for building maintenance; besides, the law banned eviction, sale or property use change, and tenants did not invest in the improvement of their homes. Many of these tenements and buildings had to be demolished due to the damage they suffered during the devastating 1985 earthquake. Jorge González Sánchez, “Dinámica Reciente de la Vivienda en Renta en la Ciudad de México,” in *Scripta Nova. Revista Electrónica de Geografía y Ciencias Sociales* X, no. 218 (2006).

⁷⁰ [que mucho le han producido con el pago de sus rentas]

outside the rooms, and were for common use.⁷¹ The ugliness and misery of the rooms in this area of the city —the first city square— permeated journalists’ and writers’ descriptions of the women’s working conditions. During the first half of the century, the “black, tiny, horrible” rooms were inhabited by women who were seen as dirty, old, withered, illiterate magnets of crime and vice. The “court of specters” that Rodríguez imagined in the story “Ave María Alley” was mirrored in countless writings.⁷² The narrative reinforced the idea that the lowest-class prostitutes had ended up in *accesorias* after passing through the brothels, call houses, cabarets and “‘ruleteo’ [street solicitation] zones.” They were considered “the lowest rung on the ladder of prostitution.”⁷³ At the opposite extreme was the Roma neighborhood and its top-class prostitutes who, probably, found out about the *Barrio Latino* eviction without even imagining that the federal government would launch a campaign against the luxurious houses they worked in.

Figure 3. Sometimes, *accesorias* or low-class brothels were part of old constructions that turned into tenements. In this photograph, there is a stone facade of an old building. In these places, women took the rooms that faced the street so as to attract clients. “Hombres conversando con prostitutas en el Callejón de Nava,” [Men Chatting With Prostitutes in Nava Alley] Fototeca Nacional, Fondo Casasola, inventory number 70647, c. 1930.



⁷¹ Armando Jiménez, *Lugares de gozo...*, 201.

⁷² [cuartos “negros, pequeños, horribles”/ “corte de espectros”]

⁷³ Renato D’Herblay, “Mercado de Carne Humana,” in *Detectives*, June 7, 1937, 22-24. [el más bajo peldaño en la escala de la prostitución]



Figure 4. Emilio Baz-Viaud captured the life of Mexico City’s lower depths just as other painters from the beginning of the century, such as Julio Ruelas or José Clemente Orozco. This painting depicts another kind of *accesoría*: small numbered rooms with no windows. “El Pierrot” Bar at the end of the street was one of the *vice centers* that were part of the *Barrio Latino* landscape, such as cabarets or dance halls. Music, alcohol and prostitution were also part of the downtown nightlife. City lighting was the result of some of the modernization works initiated in those years. In this painting, as well as in Luis Ángel Rodríguez’s story, street dogs were an essential part of the street description. These animals stressed the “wandering” tone of a street lacking traditional homes. Emilio Baz-Viaud, *La Calle de Cuauhtemotzín*, [Cuauhtemotzín Street] 1941.

Figure 5. The two following photographs appeared in an article in *Mañana* magazine. In the picture below (Illustration 2), photojournalist Nacho López captured a scene similar to the one depicted by Emilio Baz-Viaud. However, López shows less voluptuous women, dressed in a modest, less provocative way, like many of the women from that time. The closing of the tolerance zone and the banning of brothels were accompanied by complaints of harassment and extortion of “decent” women. Policemen and passers-by pretended to confuse them with sex workers so as to threaten to take them to police or to speak coarsely to them.
Nacho López c. 1951

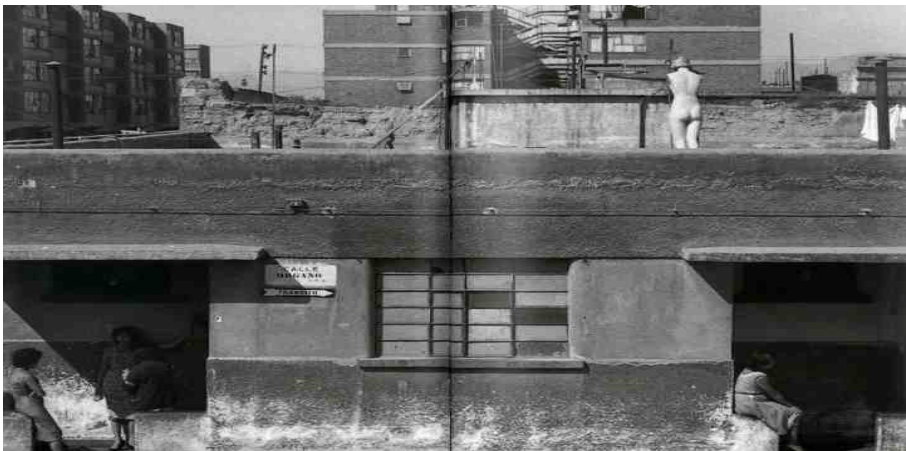
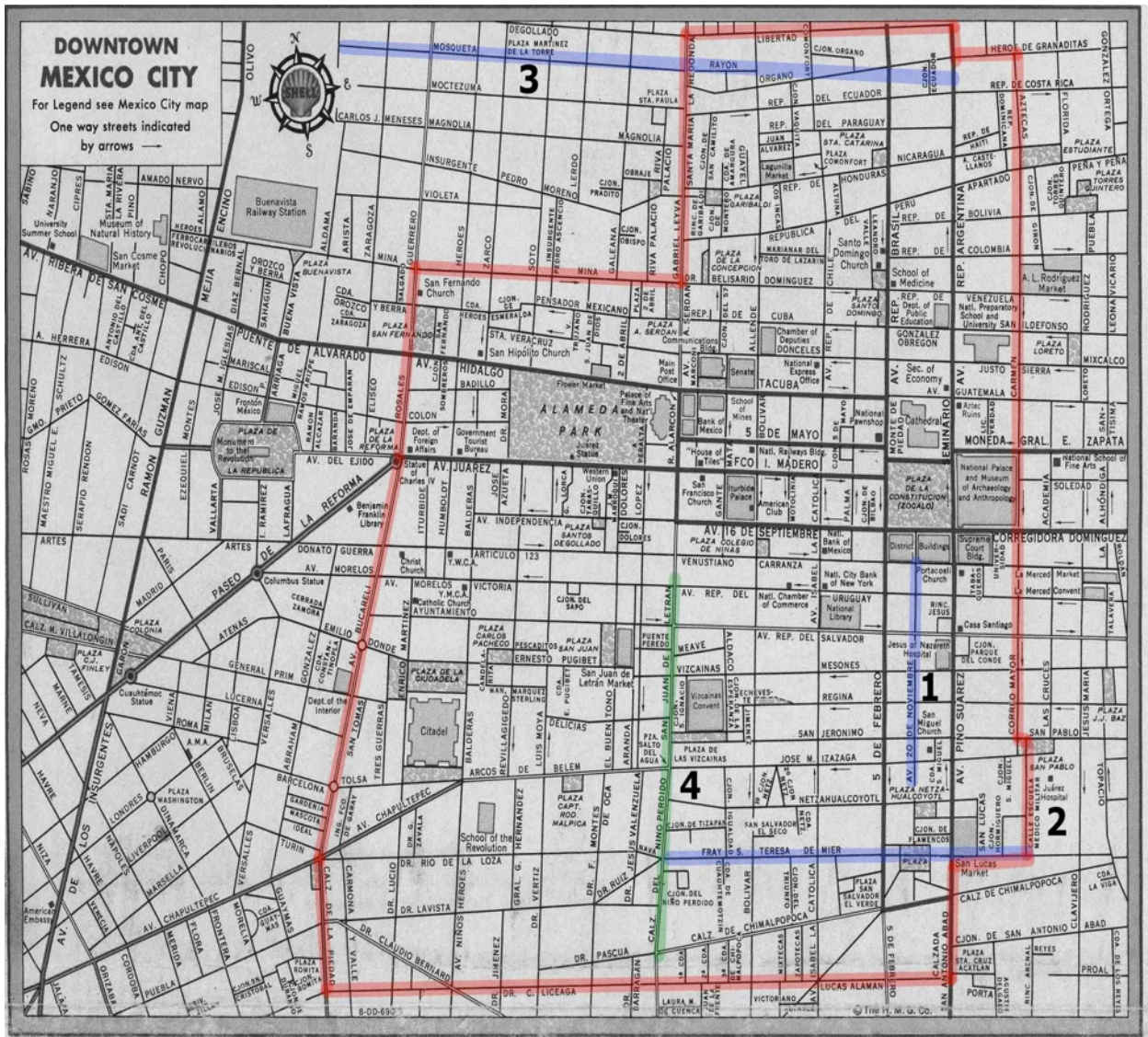


Figure 6. Several apartment blocks can be seen in the background of this view of Órgano Street. The rapid growth of the population triggered a struggle for housing and spaces. Housing units began to be integrated into the urban space, speeding up the need for roads that would allow effective commuting for city dwellers. The strategic location of the streets for commercial sex increased the tension between neighbors at the city center, prostitutes, urban planners and authorities. City growth transformed many old streets and houses, including those where prostitution was practiced.
Nacho López, c. 1951



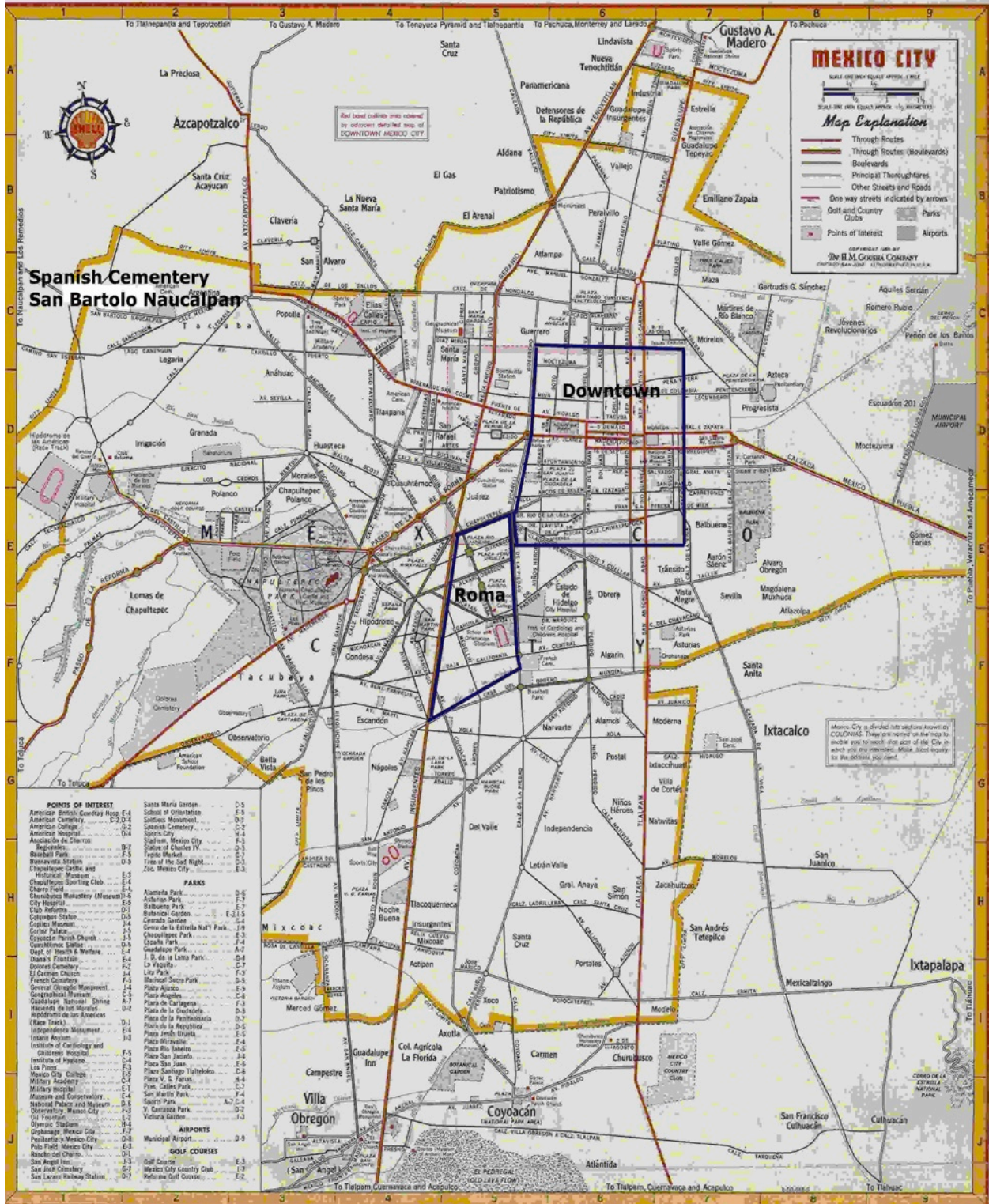
Map 1. Twentieth-century urban policies in Mexico demolished streets to give way to new roads. In the map above, the avenues built over emblematic streets for sexual commerce are shown in blue: **1)** Ave María Alley and neighboring streets transformed into 20 de Noviembre Avenue (1934); **2)** Cuauhtemotzín gave way to the broadening of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier (1938); **3)** Some decades later, in 1970, Eje 1 Norte Avenue displaced Órgano Alley and Rayón Street (1970).

In number 4 Niño Perdido Road and San Juan de Letrán Avenue are highlighted in green. In the 1930s and 1940s, they constituted the scene for women and men illegally soliciting on the streets. Years later they would become Eje Central Lázaro Cárdenas Avenue.

In 1939, authorities from the Health Inspection Office established a perimeter within which they forbade prostitution. Regardless of the measure's ineffectiveness, it was useful to define the city's tolerance zone (in red). Very likely, authorities not only took into account the streets with registered brothels, call houses, hotels or independent prostitutes, but also those where illegal prostitution abounded. The starting and ending point of prostitution was the corner of Cuauhtemotzín Street and Escuela Médico Militar Street (in this map Cuauhtemotzín appears already as Fray Servando Teresa de Mier).

Among the main streets delimiting the perimeter were Correo Mayor, Carmen, Libertad, Santa María la Redonda, Mina, Bucareli, La Piedad and Doctor Liceaga streets.

Shell Atlas of Automobile Road Maps, 1956. David Rumsey Map Collection, Cartography Associates.



Map. 2. During the first half of the twentieth century, second, third and lowest-class sexual commerce was carried out at the center of the city. Nearby, the Roma neighborhood was the scene for top-class prostitution. The location of both zones is shown in the map in relation to the limits the city had in 1956 (yellow line). In the northeast corner is the territory where the Health Inspection Office tried to send prostitutes displaced from *El Barrio Latino*. The proposal failed due to the long distance from the old tolerance zone and the lack of urban infrastructure.
Shell Atlas of Automobile Road Maps, 1956. David Rumsey Map Collection, Cartography Associates.

Brothels

Estrella, an 18-year-old girl with an impeccable appearance, working as a shorthand typist in a government office is the protagonist of the short story “El hambre” [Hunger]. She spent most of the money she earned on medicines for her mother’s chronic disease. When not working, Estrella was busy either taking care of her two little brothers or doing housework, and had no time to pay attention to the many men that tried to win her hand. One morning her life changed dramatically: her boss asked her to resign because a congressman wanted her post for his lover. Despite the young lady’s objections, her boss was adamant.

One of her workmates, “beautiful [...] 22-year-old” Raquel, on noticing Estrella crying desperately, offered her a solution to her problem: to work in a brothel on Guanajuato Street. “At six o’clock, both girlfriends took [a taxi to] Rosina’s [which was in an] aristocratic neighborhood; [the house had] parquet floor, opaque lamps, Chinese vases, patterned tiles, bedrooms in colors: blue, red, cream, velvet sofas in the living room, Persian rugs on which feet sank.” Raquel greeted Rosina warmly, and apologized for not having visited her recently. The madame, “with her gray hairs that make her look like an aristocratic marquess from some sentimental comedy,” gave a conspiratorial wink, as she knew Raquel was the lover of a general that she met in her brothel. The young woman immediately explained that her girlfriend “wants her [the madame] to initiate her into the ‘career’ [...] but she is a virgin.” Surprised, Rosina told her she cannot take Estrella on in such conditions, saying: “then complications arise; the police, court; if her mother finds out, she can cause a scandal; no, my little girls, I just can’t.” That same night, determined to work in the brothel as soon as possible, Estrella lost her virginity to a stranger.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Jaulas y Pájaros de Amor...*, 22-25. [“Hermosa...de 22 años”/“A las seis, ambas amigas tomaron [un taxi a] la casa de Rosina, en la aristocrática colonia; piso con parquet, lámparas opacas, jarrones chinos, mosaicos, alcobas en colores: azul, rojo, crema, confortables de terciopelo en la sala, tapetes persas en los que se hundían los pies”/La madame, “con su cabeza blanca que la hace semejar a una aristocrática Marquesa de alguna comedia sentimental”/“quiere que la inicie en la ‘carrera’ [...] solamente que está virgen”/“después vienen las complicaciones; la policía, los juzgados, si la madre se entera me puede hacer un escándalo, no hijitas, no puedo”]

In this vignette, various elements connected with top-tier sexual commerce in the city stand out. The image of the good big-hearted girl who falls into prostitution was not something new in the 1930s. The story characterized by the social, literary, and cinematographic discourse at that time is that of the honest young working girl who, due to lack of jobs, sees herself forced to make incursions into sexual commerce. Accelerating urbanization and industrialization during the early twentieth century, together with both the practical changes and new ideas borne by the 1910 Revolution, not only created new jobs for women, but also allowed them to integrate into the state as workers. According to historian Susie Porter, during the twentieth century women entered into a wide variety of industries, including public administration and bureaucracy. Their presence in previously male-exclusive working places, and the possibility of investing their earned money in their families or themselves, sparked off debates of economic necessity, women's morals, and consumer habits.⁷⁵ Simultaneously, the consolidation of the government and its departments prompted the city's public and private schools to open their doors to training female students in dictation, typing, shorthand writing, and other subjects which would allow them to get jobs in bureaucratic offices.⁷⁶

With these new types of jobs, many women could maintain their homes and families, as the protagonist of "El hambre" did, however, the salaries received by public employees were hardly extravagant. In bureaucracy, as in other jobs, "it was possible for a man to earn as little money as a woman, but it was not likely that a woman earned more money than a man."⁷⁷ In 1930, 51% of public female employees earned between three and four pesos a day; in 1931, a report by Mexico City's government claimed that a salary of three pesos a day allowed workers to "live on a limited

⁷⁵ Regarding this issue see Susie Porter, *Working Women in Mexico City. Public Discourses and Material Conditions 1879-1931* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2003).

⁷⁶ Susie Porter, "Espacios Burocráticos. Normas de Feminidad e Identidad de la Clase Media en México durante la década de 1930," in *Orden Social e Identidad de Género. México Siglos XIX y XX*, ed. María Teresa Fernández Aceves et al. (Guadalajara: CIESAS/Universidad de Guadalajara, 2006), 194.

⁷⁷ Susie Porter, "Espacios Burocráticos..." 196. [era posible que un hombre ganara tan poco como una mujer, pero no era probable que una mujer ganara más que un hombre]

budget.”⁷⁸ In Estrella’s story, Luis Ángel Rodríguez referred to the girl’s “insignificant salary,” [insignificante sueldo] as well as to how her earnings would change at Rosina’s house. Raquel assured the protagonist (showing her fingers adorned with diamonds) that two hours would be enough to earn 10 to 20 pesos at the brothel. Actually, Raquel’s job at the government office served to mask her other life.

Rodríguez’s images in *Jaulas y Pájaros de Amor...* were in line with media debates regarding women’s work and prostitution; he reproduced and interspersed images of poor women who fell into vice as a result of greed, necessity, or deceit. The idea of dishonored nineteenth-century women ending up as prostitutes changed to a paradigm of women seduced by furs, silk and Hollywood glamour. Less glamorously, there were the victims of white slavery, or women who could not find a decent job, and even if they could, they might suffer a lack of respect from their bosses or workmates.⁷⁹ In the 1949 movie *Aventurera*, actress Ninón Sevilla plays middle-class Elena, who, following her father’s death, tries to work as a secretary in a Ciudad Juárez office, as a store saleswoman, and as a maid, but in all the jobs is harassed by the men around her. Elena starts to work for a rich woman shortly afterwards, sold by a pimp without even noticing. After being sexually abused by a customer, under the effects of a sedative given to her by the madame, the girl complained to the brothel/cabaret owner. As a reply, the elegant woman says: “You’ll be better off here than anywhere else, you’ll earn more money than doing any other job.”⁸⁰

If any young and beautiful woman decided to work in sexual commerce, their youth and beauty guaranteed higher earnings than in more mainstream jobs: before Mexico City’s brothel

⁷⁸ Susie Porter, “Espacios Burocráticos...”, 196. [vivir limitadamente]

⁷⁹ Some examples of this rhetoric can be traced back to the mid-1920s in magazines like *El Hogar*. “Una Trata de Blancas,” *El Hogar*, no. 319, May 19, 1926, 5; “Las Apariencias,” *El Hogar*, no. 377, June 29, 1927, 5; “Un Grave Problema Social,” *El Hogar*, no. 379, July 13, 1927, 5; “Desamparo y Deshonra,” *El Hogar*, no. 500, November 6, 1929, 3.

⁸⁰ *Aventurera*. Directed by Alberto Gout. Mexico: Cinematográfica Calderón, 1949. [Aquí estarás mejor que en ninguna otra parte, ganarás más dinero que en ningún otro oficio]

ownership ban, “the Roma neighborhood meant the pinnacle of their aspirations.”⁸¹ Roma was regarded as a luxury residential area up to the mid-1940s, housing some of the wealthiest families in the city, as well as military men, high-ranking politicians, prestigious artists and intellectuals. *Art nouveau* dominated the architecture in this area, and many houses were decorated with delicate stained-glass windows. At the beginning of the century, foreign visitors compared the Roma neighborhood to some streets of European cities. In 1920, a Mexican historian claimed that progress in the city became evident in neighborhoods such as Roma or Condesa, because of their appearance, which was “truly European: it is another Mexico, a Mexico different from the one our parents lived in, made over the fields we used to play in as children.”⁸² In this area there was intense nightlife stimulated by existing nightclubs, cabarets and brothels; many of these places were advertised in tourist guides so as to attract foreign tourists (For the location of Roma see Map 2). In her book, Katherine Bliss shows several advertisements published in the paperback *México de Noche. Guía para el Hombre que Quiera Divertirse* [Mexico at Night. Guide for the Man Who Wants to Have Fun]. Among these advertisements, written in English and Spanish, tourists could find addresses, phone numbers, and names of the owners of some luxury brothels in the Roma neighborhood. For example, “Casa Olga,” owned by Olga de la Vega, advertised as “The house of distinguished atmosphere [*sic*] in the heart of the Colony.” Ines Cruz’s advertisement invited potential clients to visit the house located at 92 Valladolid Street, promising “Hygienic [*sic*] Safe and Reservation.”⁸³

Undercover investigators sent to Mexico by the League of Nations for its 1927 report on the international trafficking of women witnessed the dynamic inside Mexico City’s first-class brothels:

⁸¹ Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Jaulas y Pájaros...*, 51. [la colonia Roma constituía la cima de sus aspiraciones]

⁸² The quote comes from the book *Historia Sumaria de la Ciudad de México* by Jesús Galindo y Villa, quoted in Edgar Tavares López, *Colonia Roma* (Mexico: Editorial Clío, 1996), 50-51. [verdaderamente europeo: es otro México, un México distinto al que vivieron nuestros padres, hecho en los potreros donde nosotros jugábamos de niños]

⁸³ Katherine E. Bliss, *Compromised Positions Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 174. It is interesting to see in these advertisements, apart from misspellings such as *atmosphere* and *higenic*, that the words “Colony” and “reservation” are false cognates. The first one refers to *neighborhood*, while the second tries to transmit the concept of *private rooms*.

On the second room was a ballroom, a large *café*, and a few bedrooms opening directly to the *café*. The rooms were elaborately furnished. The ballroom was very much like a public dance-hall, with seats round the sides and an orchestra at one end. There were about 75 men and women present, including two or three elderly women who looked like chaperons and who were probably *madames* or their assistants. We were given an opportunity to select dancing partners. There was a large receptacle in front of the orchestra for contributions and a peso was expected for each dance. After we had danced we were asked to go into the *café* to purchase drinks for the girls. The 35 inmates here all seemed to be Spanish and their ages appeared to range from 16 to 25 years. The girls charge 20 pesos (\$10). In another house visited an assistant *madame* was called, an American woman, about 40 years of age. She said she had a little girl just the style I would like to meet. Presently a little half-breed girl, nearly white, was ushered into the room. She was quiet, very timid, and seemed no more than 14 or 15 years of age. She was dressed in green silk *crêpe* with a large Spanish comb in her hair. She came over and sat down after greeting me in a frightened little voice. It was evident that the child had not been in the life long. The *madame* explained that she was a new girl and added: ‘Yes, she is awfully young, but that is the way they are here’.⁸⁴

It is noteworthy that in this report, as well as in Rodríguez’s story that opened this chapter, *madames* offer clients very young women, appealing, perhaps, to the commonest requests from frequent brothel goers: “with this you won’t say no”/“she said she had a little girl just the style I would like to meet.”⁸⁵ The description of the women in the report by the League of Nations allows us to suggest that fair skin and Europeanized appearance were highly valued. It is likely that some women who “seemed to be Spanish” were foreign, or Mexicans with fair hair or skin and/or light-colored eyes, similar to the “little half-breed girl, nearly white,” whom the *madame* showed the investigator.⁸⁶ Clothes and accessories such as the Spanish comb may have served to accentuate the fiction. The idea of style and elegance that brothel owners tried to sell in the advertisements was reflected in the furniture, live music, drinks, and, of course, the appearances of the women who worked there. This must have had a bearing —although it is difficult to tell to what extent— on the fantasies of customers like José Vasconcelos who, in his memoirs, maintained that in some brothels “the most beautiful and sophisticated women provided stacks of pleasure.”⁸⁷ Even the *madames*’ appearance in Rodríguez’s stories is depicted in accordance with the place they are in charge of: the second-class

⁸⁴ League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children. Part Two* (Geneva: Publications of the League of Nations, 1927), 119.

⁸⁵ Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Jaulas y Pájaros de Amor...*, 14.

⁸⁶ League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body...*, 119.

⁸⁷ Fernanda Núñez Becerra, “Los clientes...,” unpublished manuscript. [las mujeres más bellas y sofisticadas daban placer a granel]

brothel woman was “an elephantic mistress” [una patrona elefansiaca]; the women from Ave María Alley, “harpies” [arpías], while Rosina, the woman from the Roma, seemed “an aristocratic marquess” [una aristocrática marquesa].⁸⁸



Figure 7. In elegant brothels, musicians, barmen, and waiters were part of the male staff, since alcohol consumption and music were indispensable inside this kind of business. Mexico City’s most successful artists, politicians, military men, and businessmen gathered regularly in bordellos. These men paid high sums to have fun with young and attractive women. The people that appear in this photograph might have borrowed the musicians’ instruments, and put all the bottles of alcohol they were drinking together to stress the bohemian atmosphere of the place. In the background there is a blocked-off window, as the regulations for the practice of prostitution compelled brothels and call houses to block the view from all the windows so that neighbors and passers-by could not see what was happening inside. *Casa de Citas*, Fototeca Nacional, Fondo Casasola, Número de Inventario 72925, ca. 1925.

⁸⁸ Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Jaulas y Pájaros de Amor...*, 13, 15, 25.



Agustín Lara (1897-1970) was one of the most popular Mexican music composers from the twentieth century. It is well known that Lara started his musical career as a brothel pianist. He dedicated many of his songs to prostitutes; in fact, there was a rumor that the scar he has on one of his cheeks was caused by a prostitute in a jealous rage. In the image to the right (**Figure 8**) are Lara and the well-known madame Graciela Olmos *La Bandida*. His compositions were used as soundtracks for many movies from the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. He wrote the song *Santa* for one of the film versions of Federico Gamboa's novel in 1931. He gained an international reputation as a prolific composer. Artists such as Desi Arnaz, Nat King Cole, and Bing Crosby recorded his songs. In the image below (**Figure 9**) is Agustín Lara, Edith Piaf, and Gigi (or Yiyi) Gasca, the third wife of Lara.



As mentioned earlier, the legal minimum age for the registration of women at the Health Inspection office was 18 years old. Probably, due to high demand for young women, as well as corruption of both personnel at the Health Inspection office and of madames, many under-age women prostituted inside authorized brothels. Some young and adult women were victims of deceit and exploitation, but others stated they entered prostitution rings because of economic necessity, claiming they stayed in sexual commerce with full consciousness of their decision. In prostitution, the line that separates coercion from free will is not easy to define, as it is not easy to calculate how many madames took on under-age women, and how many decided to forgo the greater profit, and avoid problems with authorities. Estrella's story portrays a madame who is reluctant to take her on because she does not want to have problems in the future; the regulations denied the registration of "maidens" [doncellas] even if the girls insisted on it.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, as described in *Detectives* magazine, there were "virgins raffles" [rifas de vírgenes] in luxury brothels. According to *Detectives*, a hundred pesos allowed "corrupted politicians, renowned professionals and military men" the opportunity to enter a raffle in which the winner deflowered a girl.⁹⁰ There were other cases, such as the one at a Rayón Street brothel in October, 1938: Alberto Chimal Cedillo showed up at the bordello asking for work for his companion, a girl between 14 and 15 years old. The women there told him to come back later, and took the opportunity to call the police; thus, they facilitated his arrest, and testified against him; the accused was tried for kidnapping, rape and attempted procuring.⁹¹

⁸⁹ "Reglamento para el Ejercicio de la Prostitución," in *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* 1 and 2 (1926): 165, Chapter II, Article 8.

⁹⁰ Andrés Gómez, "Recuerdos de un Agente de Sanidad I," *Detectives*, July 23, 1934, 6-7; Andrés Gómez, "Recuerdos de un Agente de Sanidad II," *Detectives*, July 30, 1934, 8-14; Andrés Gómez, "¿Dónde son Rifadas las Mujeres?," *Detectives*, August 6, 1934, 12-19; Andrés Gómez, "El Infame Comercio de Vírgenes de las Memorias de un Agente de Sanidad," *Detectives*, August 13, 1934, 7-14. [políticos corrompidos, profesionistas de renombre y militares]

⁹¹ Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (hereafter AHCM), "Alberto Chimal Cedillo" (1938), Fondo: *Cárceles*, Sección: *Penitenciaría, expedientes de reos*, caja 428, exp.6938. Katherine Bliss documented some other cases in which madames reported to the police places where underage girls were prostituted. According to Bliss, through this strategy madames

Chimal Cedillo's process was carried out under the laws that punished anyone who got involved in the prostitution of others *without* legal authorization. Since the early twentieth century and up to the late 1930s, the success or failure of prostitution regulation by the state had been the object of numerous debates. At first, the main discussion was related to the efficacy of the system in the reduction of the rate of venereal contagion. Gradually, the League of Nations' arguments, which suggested that brothels were exploitation centers, prompted a great deal of interest among Mexican experts. In this context, the exploitation of the nation's women was described as an antirevolutionary activity, and everything contrary to the Revolution was related to old dictatorship times. Brothels became suspicious places where it was possible to organize a conspiracy against the government. Some of the most influential physicians accused the state of living off the prostitution of its own women, through the tax imposed on brothels. In addition, there was the climate of the Second World War, rushing the Mexican government to subscribe to international organizations, as well as to commit to many of their causes. As for the case of the fight against sexual trafficking and exploitation of women, the immediate remedy was the closure of brothels and assignation houses in some parts of the country.⁹²

By 1940, Mexico City inhabitants found out about the government's campaign against prostitution, about the mass closure of brothels, and about the strategies used by madames and sex workers to defend their working spaces. Secret agents were able to testify at police stations about several operations that gathered data on the distribution inside the house, the number of bedrooms and the type of furniture, all as a way of proving that a house was being used as a brothel. Some of the agents' statements were: "the house has 10 furnished bedrooms, a bar attended by two barmen,

sought to eliminate "competitors in order to extend their business influence." Katherine Bliss, *Compromised Positions...*, 91.

⁹² The debates over prostitution in Mexico and at the League of Nations, as well as over the madames' defense strategies are explained in detail in chapters 1 and 3.

a big dance hall, a 10-musician orchestra;”⁹³ “the aforementioned house, apart from the bathtub and the dance hall, has fifteen rooms that [...] were furnished as bedrooms, and now [...] they have] sofas;”⁹⁴ “a visual inspection was carried out in the aforementioned house, finding a bar and bedrooms, as well as a piano, several musical instruments, and, on the top floor, several bedrooms with their respective bathrooms.”⁹⁵ Sometimes, brothel owners also used furniture as an alibi to defend themselves against accusations, such as in the case of the property located in 87 Zacatecas Street, where an inspection was carried out “by request of the defense.” The authorities confirmed there were no bedrooms or beds, “only a saloon, restaurant, kitchen, bar, and lavatories,” several rooms for repairing work, and commercial premises that were part of the building. However, the defense was discredited due to the fact that during the closure the commercial premises were not sealed, which allowed full access into the house. As “essential elements of [the] investigation, [that it is] worth mentioning” the public prosecutor included the find of “4 douches and a bottle of permanganate, useful for the cleaning and disinfection of those who practice procuring.”⁹⁶

News about the fight against brothels spread throughout the country, causing different reactions. In Toluca, a city located 70 km from Mexico City, a group of nine prostitutes wrote a letter to President Ávila Camacho, in order to express their fears and to request that authorities did not apply the same measures in the Estado de México:

⁹³ AHDF, Moscoso Cajide José (1941), Fondo: *Cárceles*, Sección: *Penitenciaria*, *expedientes de reos*, caja: 568, expediente: 1288. [la casa contiene 10 recámaras amuebladas, una cantina en la que atienden dos cantineros, un gran salón para baile, una orquesta de 10 músicos]

⁹⁴ AHDF, Olmos González Graciela (1941), Fondo: *Cárceles*, Sección: *Penitenciaria*, *expedientes de reos*, caja: 561, exp. 381. [la citada casa, además de la tina y el salón de baile cuenta con quince cuartos que [...] estaban amueblados con muebles de recámara y ahora [...] confortables]

⁹⁵ AHDF, Olmos González Graciela (1940), Fondo: *Cárceles*, Sección: *Penitenciaria*, *expedientes de reos*, caja: 558, exp. 7355. [se practicó una inspección ocular en la mencionada casa, encontrando cantina y recámaras, así como un piano, varios instrumentos de música, y en la planta alta, varias recámaras con sus respectivos baños]

⁹⁶ AHDF, Martínez Pérez Refugio M. (1944), Fondo: *Cárceles*, Sección: *Penitenciaria*, *expedientes de reos*, caja: 809, exp. 3673. [“a petición de la defensa”/“solamente un salón, restaurant, cocina, cantina y servicios sanitarios”/“elementos esenciales de [la] averiguación, dignos de hacerse mención”/ “4 irrigadores y una botella de permanganato, útiles para el aseo y la desinfección de los que practican el lenocinio”]

THIS IS HOW IT IS SEÑOR PRESIDENTE: WE ARE WOMEN OF EASY VIRTUE [...] doctor Mariano Olibera [sic] warned us about a new law that will throw us out of the houses we work in [...] because of this, mister president, we feel something you cannot imagine because we know the problems of those women who in Mex[ico City] have been thrown to the streets and who far from helping them [the authorities] have harmed them, you must understand [...] that by leaving us without a house, we are exposed to the will of those evil men who, far from respecting us and paying for our services, will do [...] whatever they want with us [O]n the other hand far from being a benefit to society and honest youth, misunderstandings will come and men will confuse honorable girls with women of easy virtue as is happening in Mex[ico City] [...] we do not think you [...] agree with this, which is unconstitutional and immoral[...] please understand [...] that we are isolated in a house [...] only of our own will, without anyone forcing us, nor exploiting us [...] the woman in charge of the house is pretty thoughtful and kind [...] since instead of exploiting us she worries about us and we would be dishonest and false if we said any other thing since with a lie of this kind we would be committing a felony and are not capable of paying something good with evil [...]⁹⁷

In this letter the signers summarized some fears and arguments related to the persecution of owners and managers of houses of prostitution in Mexico City. In their defense, just as their counterparts in the capital, they used their constitutional rights and stated the risks society and its “honorable girls” would be exposed to as a result of the lack of laws regulating prostitution. They accepted their profession (emphasizing it in capital letters) and defined it is a necessary evil. Prostitutes expressed their fear at “the will of those evil men”, who could also be customers, corrupt agents or pimps, being “able to do whatever they want” with them. Deep inside, their main fear was to lose the protection they had indoors.

While for prostitutes these places were their working areas, for many doctors and bureaucrats following the regulations of the League of Nations, these were exploitation centers.

⁹⁷ AGN, “Consuelo Rauda, Francisca López y demás Firmantes al Presidente” (1940) Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho [187]/Box: 0218 (151.3/241-151.3/310). [SE TRATA DE ESTO SEÑOR PRESIDENTE: SOMOS MUJERES GALANTES [...] el doctor Mariano Olibera [sic] nos puso en conocimiento de que muy pronto seríamos expulsadas de las casas a las que pertenecemos según una nueva ley [...] con esto señor Presidente sentimos lo que no se puede imaginar porque sabemos bien de las penalidades tan grandes que están pasando todas esas personas a quienes en Méx[ico] han arrojado a la calle y a quienes lejos de hacerseles un beneficio les han hecho un grave mal, pues comprenda usted [...] que al arrojarnos a la calle nos dejan a la voluntad de hombres desalmados que lejos de respetarnos y retribuir el precio de nuestros servicios harán de nosotros [...] lo que les venga en gana por otra parte lejos de hacersele un beneficio a la sociedad y a la juventud honesta vendrán las equivocaciones de los hombres para señoritas honorables a quienes confunden con una mujer galante como está pasando en Méx[ico] [...] no creemos que Ud. [...] consienta que se lleve a efecto esto que es anticonstitucional e inmoral [...] comprenda [...] que estamos asiladas en una casa [...] únicamente por nuestra propia voluntad y sin que haya nadie que nos obligue a estar por la fuerza y mucho menos que se nos explote [...] la Sra. donde estamos alojadas es bastante consciente y considerada [...] pues lejos de explotarnos nos cuida y cometeríamos un acto innoble y falto de veracidad y seríamos canallas si aseverásemos lo contrario pues con una mentira de estas cometeríamos una felonía y no somos capaces de pagar un bien con un mal] Emphasis in the original.

Trying to avoid closure and detention of madames, prostitutes attempted to change the idea of being victims of threats and coercion. In the statements given before a judge after the raids, they often declared that although they worked out of necessity, it was of their own free will. The idea was to convince the authorities that their work was their choice, that no one obtained profits from their bodies, and that there were not any fees for using the houses, which, they assured, they only visited to meet customers or to have fun with friends. If men required their services, they took them to love hotels nearby. Often they stated they worked in brothels because someone reliable had told them they could earn some money “fichando” (making costumers drink alcohol inside the house, but without sexual relations). If prostitutes gave money to the owner it was for rent, because they had nowhere to live, or because they were fond of the owner.

Such was the case of María Guadalupe Ortiz Sánchez, who, on July 15th, 1941, denied police accusations that she exploited women to earn a living. She declared she was the owner of the property located at 144 Sinaloa Street in the Roma neighborhood, which started life as a brothel in 1940. However, due to difficulties caused by new regulations, she had been forced to close it down “hoping to open its doors again”. She said that she kept living there because of her one-year contract, that the place was not dedicated to sex trade anymore, and that a male friend of hers dealt with all her expenses. That is the reason why it had been a “mere coincidence that her female friends had been visiting her in the company of some male friends” the day when the raid took place. The other women who were arrested; Edelmira Montemayor, Paz González, and Rebeca Cornejo, also stated “they were visiting just as good friends.”⁹⁸

Officer Alfonso Alcántara Medrano, who testified he followed superior orders to 4 La Libertad Street, arrested Elva del Bosque del Río. There he found 12 or 15 men, some of whom

⁹⁸ AHDF, “Ortiz Sánchez María Guadalupe” (1941), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaria, *Expedientes de Reos*, Caja: 599, Expediente: 5541. [“con la esperanza siempre de volverla a abrir”/ una “verdadera casualidad que sus amigas la hubieran ido a visitar acompañadas de varios amigos”/ la “visitaban un rato como amigas que eran”]

were drunk, and one woman, Eva Gutiérrez, who was having sexual relations with a customer. Elva stated before the judge that she had been a madame for twelve years and that now she was the manager of that house, which had permission to sell alcoholic drinks. She explained the situation as: “some girls, without any family or homeless, living there; at the same time, [the brothel] was their shelter and they were also given the opportunity to earn some money; they c[ould] drink but no one forces them to do so[...] some of them pa[id] their rent while others live[d] off the [madame].” Elva said that men could visit the girls and spend the night, but she did not receive any part of the money they earned from sex. Profit from the business came from the rent and the sale of alcoholic drinks.⁹⁹ The argument was that women were not exploited because no one forced them to sell their bodies, but they would not be stopped if they wanted to do so. At other times, pupils stated that they went to places that functioned as bars, just for fun or to “fichar”, that is, every time they had a drink as a present from the customers, the manager gave them a *ficha* (token): the more *fichas* they got, the more money they received from the manager.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, these gestures towards solidarity could not save madames from legal punishment, nor could they defend against the testimonies of secret agents. Repeatedly, the agents passed themselves off as customers of the places they sought to verify. In their reports, they included negotiations with the workers as evidence; such negotiations involved asking the price for sex services, as well as the name of the person in charge. Sometimes they also assured they had seen couples performing some kind of sexual activity. Everything served as evidence to build a case: the furniture, alcoholic drinks, musical instruments and the arrangement inside the house. In the case of María Guadalupe, the agents found no evidence of sex, but despite the statement that the bedrooms

⁹⁹ AHDF, “Del Bosque del Río Elba” (1940), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaría, *Expedientes de Reos*, Caja: 599, Expediente: 7440. [algunas muchachas, viviendo allí algunas de ellas, por falta de familiares o casa ‘y que al mismo tiempo les proporciona abrigo y les da la oportunidad de que ganen algún dinero, tomando en la casa, pero nadie las obliga [...] algunas de ellas pagan su cuarto y otras viven a expensas de la declarante]

¹⁰⁰ AHDF, “Martínez Pérez Refugio” (1944), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaría, *Expedientes de Reos*, Caja: 809, Expediente: 3673.

and the house were for “personal” use, the judge declared the *matrona* guilty, claiming that procuring was a “continuous offense”. According to him, she was the owner of “the assignation house located on 144 Sinaloa Street”, and, although María Guadalupe and the women living there assured it was not a house of prostitution anymore, the authority decided to apply strict grammatical criteria: “It can be seen the statement is in present tense, and as in our language every assignation house is a brothel, and every brothel is dedicated to sexual exploitation [...] this activity is considered pimping [...] the fact that she had declared that she is not dedicated to this business anymore, even if it is true [...] does not erase guilt [...] because the habit the law talks about is still alive.”¹⁰¹

The number of clandestine brothels and street solicitations increased considerably as a consequence of the raids, and the failure of the defensive strategies of the *matronas* and sex workers. Little by little, *madrotas* started to change their businesses into restaurants, spas, and stores, which operated as underground prostitution centers. It worked as follows: the customer entered, asked for any legal product sold there, and then subtly asked the manager for an available girl. She then told clients it was necessary to contact the girls, and set the hour the men should return at, or, if preferred, costumers could wait for the girls to arrive, and once there, the owner/manager offered a room.

By changing the nature of the spaces, the ways of sex business also changed. Advertisements in newspapers were very useful because sometimes the location of brothels was kept secret, and the new distribution inside the establishments did not allow girls to wait too long for the customers to arrive. For example, on May 18th, 1943, Martha Moreno Karam was accused by a woman that had been her maid of using a stall as a front for sex trade. Outside, Martha sold cigars, beer, and other

¹⁰¹ AHDF, “Ortiz Sánchez María Guadalupe” (1941), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaría, *Expedientes de Reos*, Caja: 599, Expediente: 5541. [“un delito continuo”/“de la casa de asignación ubicada en las calles de Sinaloa 144”/“Como se ve, tal afirmación está hecha en tiempo presente, y como dentro de nuestro lenguaje casa de asignación es lupanar, y todo lupanar es una empresa dedicada a explotar el comercio carnal [...] esta actividad constituye el delito de lenocinio [...] el hecho de que haya manifestado que actualmente no se dedica a explotar dicho negocio, aun suponiéndolo cierto [...] no destruye la culpabilidad [...] porque queda viva la habitualidad de que habla la ley]. Emphasis in the original.

alcoholic drinks, while inside there were rooms where she served drinks to the customers; “when a well-known customer arrive[d] and ask[ed] for a girl”, Martha phoned one who would arrive via taxi to *serve* the customer. To clarify the statement of the complainant, the police sub-chief ordered two agents to investigate the stall. They ordered some drinks and asked Maria if she knew some girls to have fun with, and she responded that she used to have two girls working for her permanently, but now she needed to call them on the phone. After a mutual agreement on price she told them to come back later. Hours later they found that only one woman had arrived so Martha proposed they take turns having sex with the girl, but the agents said they wanted one each. For her defense, during the trial some witnesses testified that they knew Martha and that she only sold stall food, lemonade, and beer. Her lawyer also accused the officers of causing a crime instead of stopping it, but she was found guilty, had to pay a 600 pesos fine, and was conditionally released.¹⁰²

Another case that illustrates the way things worked within clandestine brothels is the house at 19 Tenango Street, the property of Rebeca Hernández Hernández. On July 1947, after the investigation carried out by “agent 23” Jorge Villalobos Moguel, two customers and two prostitutes gave depositions to the judge. The customers stated they saw an advertisement for a sale of “international” and “imported shirts” in a newspaper. One of them declared that as he arrived at the place, he negotiated the price —25 pesos— and had sex with one of the women, while the other was being arrested while knocking at the door. The officer stated that when he was gathering information about the place, he had found that a password was required to be allowed in: “Don’t get scared.” When he entered he found Concha Álvarez Sevilla, who told him that they only gave massages; if any customer wanted to take one of the girls with him, he had to pay 50 pesos to the owner. Later, both undressed, and when she was going to give him a “French job [oral sex]” the authorities arrived.

¹⁰² AHDF, “Moreno Karam Martha” (1943), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaría, Expedientes de Reos, Caja: 736, Expediente: 3613. [cuando llega un cliente conocido y pide una muchacha]

Concha said she started working there because a month and a half ago she saw an ad in the newspaper: “Woman [*señora*] for easy work is required.”¹⁰³ When she arrived, Rebeca told her the work was having “sexual negotiations” with men at the house, and that half of the money received “per time” —averaging three to seven customers a day— was for her, as the owner. Another girl said that she gave the madame five to ten pesos, but “if she did not want to, she gave [Rebeca] nothing.” The accused tried to defend herself by saying that she and her partners lived in the house, sharing expenses without promoting prostitution. After reviewing the evidence, the judge ordered her detention.¹⁰⁴

Stories like this happened repeatedly. Throughout the decade, the sex trade was most visible on streets, bars, nightclubs and low-level hotels. The business was too profitable to disappear at the same speed authorities closed houses of prostitution. There were different prices, from 75 pesos per customer in luxurious brothels —such as the one owned by Graciela Olmos, *La Bandida*, (which equaled 25 pesos profit for her)— to three pesos in the *accessorias* of Callejón del Órgano (25 or 50 cents for the *matronas*).¹⁰⁵ Even if prostitutes or *matronas* had only a couple of customers, they still earned more daily than any other worker making minimum wage (which increased by 1.67 pesos from 1940 to 1946 while prices for corn, beans and sugar increased 300-400%).¹⁰⁶

Leonor de la Fuente, —who owned the brothel that was headquarters of the union madames tried to form in 1940— was interviewed by the newspaper *La Crítica* five years after the regulations on the banning of brothels and the persecution of their owners and managers. She stated that even if

¹⁰³ It is important to make the distinction between *señora* and *señorita* in Spanish. While the first could be translated as “married woman”, and the latter as single, in common language *señora* could also define someone who is not *señorita* anymore, that is, a woman that has already lost her virginity. Thus, the way ads were written could give readers a hint of the kind of job required. I thank Gabriela Cano for this observation. [“camisas internacionales” o “camisas importadas/“no se asuste”/ “iba a hacerle un trabajo ‘a la francesa”/“solicitaba señora para trabajo fácil”/“tratos sexuales”/“por rato”/“trabajo ‘a la francesa”/“aunque cuando ella no quería no le daba ni un centavo”]

¹⁰⁴ AHDF, “Rebeca Hernández Hernández” (1947), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaria, *Expedientes de Reos*, Caja: 1055, Expediente: 7769.

¹⁰⁵ AHDF, “Graciela Olmos González” (1947), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaria, *Expedientes de Reos*, Caja: 1054, Expediente: 7666; AHDF “Alcázar Cervantes Natalia” (1944), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaria, *Expedientes de Reos*, Caja: 813, Expediente: 4249.

¹⁰⁶ Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Cotidianidades, Imaginarios y Contextos...*, 452.

authorities had good intentions punishing *matronas* who were exploiting girls, legislative mistakes had led to consequences which society was paying. Most affected were the “young men that will be the leaders in politics and economics of the nation.”¹⁰⁷ The prohibition of prostitution not only had not stopped exploitation, but it had left women more vulnerable. From her perspective, prostitutes and society were as a result left defenseless against venereal disease, corruption, and cynical short-sighted ethics within prostitution establishments.

According to De la Fuente, fewer women were going to Morelos hospital to be treated for venereal disease, because they were no longer obliged. With the extinction of tolerance zones and houses of prostitution “the result was the opposite of what was expected by legislators”: women wandered day or night along downtown streets and paid fees to police so they could work freely. The madame reported that during this process, owners of hotels profited significantly because of the multiplication of street prostitutes (apart from the hotel owners developing a collaborative relationship with the local officers for the exploitation of women).¹⁰⁸ Owners of cabarets and bars, as well as pimps, joined in; the latter began to dominate the streets more than ever.

Responding to a direct question from the press on how the problem of prostitution should be solved, De la Fuente suggested the owners of brothels, cabarets and restaurant-bars should compromise to follow the law and protect their workers from exploitation. Women were currently obliged to drink alcohol on commission, and to bribe police officers when they left nightclubs or when selling their bodies in the street. The *matrona* affirmed that the state should acknowledge the organizations formed by the brothel and cabaret owners, with the objectives of life insurance, workshops, and literacy classes to broaden horizons. This, the article assured, affected tourism, an industry that should be protected by government, but “under a moral basis” [sobre bases morales].

¹⁰⁷ ¿Debe ser Reestablecido (*sic*) el Servicio de Sanidad?, *La Crítica*, March 1, 1945, p.1. [los hombres que mañana están llamados a ser los dirigentes de la política y la economía de la Nación]

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* [aconteció exactamente lo contrario de lo que, con buena intención, los legisladores habían tratado de remediar]

Although nightclub and cabaret owners paid taxes, the amount of money spent on extortion was higher, and they hired a lot of women (as waitresses, showgirls and prostitutes) infected with venereal disease.¹⁰⁹

The situation described in De la Fuente's interview for *La Crítica* reflected the fears of prostitutes in Toluca, expressed in the letter to President Ávila Camacho: the difficulties of working on the street. There is a chance that the rhetoric used in most of the documents written by women working indoors hid the problems they faced. The environments in which they worked were wide-ranging. There was financial exploitation, and maybe physical crime and physical abuse inside brothels, however, from the moment the French system disappeared, sex workers faced even higher levels of corruption, coercion and violence. From 1946 to 1952 there were more men arrested for procuring than women. More than half of the accused were involved in crimes concerning verbal or physical abuse, or even murder.

Some brothels continued operating under the protection of politicians and important people. In 1947, Ricardo Garibay worked as inspector for the government of the city. In his memoirs he recalled that it was impossible to fine high-class bordellos belonging to "very influential ladies" [señoras influyentísimas] such as "La Bandida, la Ruth, la Malinche, la de Pugibét, la Zoila, la Juanacatlán."¹¹⁰ Though it is true that women like *La Bandida* continued working up to 1962, brothels like hers mainly accepted affluent clients. In general, the campaign against brothels had led to a dramatic decrease in their numbers. From 1940 onwards bordellos operated outside the law, and many of them were pushed into the background. Instead, nightclubs and the *cabaretera* image filled the space left by houses of prostitution in the urban landscape, and in the imagination of Mexico City inhabitants. At the same time, the increase in the number of pimps, not prosecuted by law the same way women were, brought new rules to the operation of the sex trade. Streetwalkers,

¹⁰⁹ La Prostitución en México ¿Debe ser Restablecido el Servicio de Sanidad?, *La Crítica*, May 1, 1945, p.5.

¹¹⁰ Ricardo Garibay, *Cómo se gana la vida* (Mexico: Joaquín Mortíz, 1992), 108.

violence, corruption, coercion, as well as illegal prostitution in cabarets, bars, and cheap hotels became the trademark of sexual commerce in the city during the following decades.

Hotels

On April 16, 1940, a group of men who identified themselves as “some bachelors”[solterones] wrote President Lázaro Cárdenas to inform him how the laws against procuring had affected them. In their letter they praised some of the executive measures against “white slavery” as well as against brothel female owners who “exploit[ed]” prostitutes. Nevertheless, in the first lines of the document they asked the president to abolish the new laws as they felt they had caused more problems than benefits, above all regarding the men’s sexual routine. As a result of the “moralizing labor of governors”, “young and old bachelors” now had to perform activities that threatened the city’s morality. Since there were no places left for casual sex, these men had to go to the city outskirts with their “girlfriends or lovers” to have sex in their cars. “Even more immoral,” those who could not “have available” their love partners, due to no suitable places, “had to visit and request prostitutes” who had moved to apartments where they received clients, as their neighbors —“decent families” and “little boys and girls” were well aware of the situation.¹¹¹

With these stories the “bachelors” tried to defend places they considered appropriate for satisfying “a need [...] for the health of the body”: love hotels and “discrete room houses.” Two other arguments in favor of the existence of these places are evident in the letter, apart from morality. On one hand, hotels were necessary because prostitutes escaped the exploitation they suffered at now clandestine brothels, and the bachelors added that prostitutes “should practice [their profession] on their own, they should get by on their own, they must be allowed to do so, but properly registered, and they should report [to the Health Inspection Office].” On the other hand,

¹¹¹ “Carta al Presidente Lázaro Cárdenas. Varios Solterones Jóvenes o Viejos,” (1940), AGN, Fondo: Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas, 525.3 (1). [“obra moralizadora de [los] gobernantes”/“solterones jóvenes y viejos”/“novias o amantes” /“Más inmoral todavía” /“disponer”/“ten[ían] que visitar y solicitar a las mujeres galantes”/“familias honradas”/“niños y niñas de corta edad que se dan cuenta”]

they suggested that “[women] who do not live off prostitution, and who need to have an intimate interview, either with their boyfriend or lover, for love not for business, ought to be allowed to visit discrete room houses.”¹¹² The bachelors also suggested that these houses should follow regulations that forbid the owners from selling alcoholic drinks or trade women, conscious that exploitation was the main state argument in the fight against procuring. The last paragraph of their letter reads:

It is good that there are no brothels or call houses, but hotels and discrete room houses must continue operating for they help to satisfy a social need, for being more moral attending these places than having to go to tenements or avenues and hidden plains in cars. If you [the authorities] want to check, take a short visit [...] after 7 in the evening along [several] avenues, some gardens or parks and you will see how far the moralizing labor of our governors has gone.¹¹³

This document was written weeks after the government started a campaign aimed to punish, among others, those who ran, managed, supported, or obtained economic benefits from “venues expressly devoted to exploit prostitution.”¹¹⁴ Reforms to Article 207 of the Penal Code were very clear regarding the illegality of brothels and call houses; however, the way the law was written did not include the word *hotels*. During the time prostitution was regulated, many hotels had to be registered at the Health Inspection Office with the objective of allowing commercial sex inside their rooms. At the beginning of the implementation of new laws against procuring in Mexico City, authorities channeled their efforts into closing brothels and call houses, although it was announced that they would also take drastic measures against love hotels. The efforts must have caused unease among customers like the “bachelors,” and, of course, among hoteliers. Nevertheless, the raid against those

¹¹² [satisfacer “una necesidad [...] para salud del cuerpo”/“las casas de cuartos discretos”/ “que ejerzan ellas solas, busquen su vida, debe permitirseles, pero debidamente registradas y que pasen su visita [a la oficina de la Inspección de Sanidad]”/ “las [mujeres que] no viven precisamente de la prostitución, y que tienen necesidad de una entrevista íntima, ya sea con su novio o con su amante, por amor no por negocio, debe dejárseles concurrir a las casas de cuartos discretos”]

¹¹³ AGN, “Carta al Presidente Lázaro Cárdenas. Varios Solterones...” [Bien está que no haya prostíbulos ni casas de citas pero los hoteles y casas de cuartos discretos deben seguir funcionando por una necesidad social, por ser más moral este proceder que tener que concurrir a las vecindades o calzadas y llanitos en los coches. Si quieren desengañarse dense una vueltecita [...] después de las 7 de la noche por [varias] calzadas [...] algunos jardines o parques y ya verán a lo que ha llegado la obra moralizadora de nuestros gobernantes]

¹¹⁴ *Diario Oficial*, February 14, 1940, CXVIII, no. 37, 2. [lugares de concurrencia expresamente dedicados a explotar la prostitución]

places did not equal the effects of the brothel closures. Throughout the decade hotels continued operating openly and in a relatively normal way, along with street prostitution; this does not mean they were exempt from pressure by the police, neighbors or the press. The skill with which hoteliers played the cards of legality, liberty, and the respectability of their establishments and of their guests, allowed them to overcome obstacles as they employed defenses that brothel-owners could not.

Many of the strategies hoteliers employed to keep their businesses running in the 1940s were legal maneuvers they had been using since the years of regulated prostitution. In 1929, the commission in charge of planning a tolerance zone reported that hotels were opening their doors again despite having been closed down by Health Office inspectors. Authorities had suspended the closures since owners promised to only accommodate travelers in the future. The commission assured that the “owners simulate[d] license changes, like hotels that were apparently honorable.” However, they still received prostitutes, and the sanctions applied did not actually affect the business dynamics in connection with prostitution. The commission’s proposed punishment was to revoke the license of establishments that promoted clandestine sexual commerce, and to disallow the establishing of new hotels on the same premises as shut-down ones.¹¹⁵ It seems that such proposals did not succeed, as the granting of licenses and the honorability of hotels reemerged as central issues of the debate in the 1940s.

Before going into these discussions in depth it is worth stopping to examine the “discrete room houses” which “the bachelors” referred to in their letter, since the print media often mentioned them in articles related to prostitution and love hotels. Also known as “*reservados* [private rooms],” these houses offered rooms where couples could stay for some hours and have sexual encounters, with the guarantee of complete confidentiality of the users’ identities, particularly the

¹¹⁵ “Informe de la Comisión Encargada de Planear una Zona de Tolerancia,” (1929), Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Salud (hereafter AHSS), Fondo: Salubridad Pública, Sección: Antivenérea, Caja: 3, Exp. 10. [Los “propietarios simulan cambios de propiedad como hoteles aparentemente honorables”]

women's. *Detectives* magazine explained to its readers how these places operated in a 1937 article. According to the magazine there were two buildings, with numerous rooms, on central Insurgentes Avenue, and others located in different areas of the city. "Married women" met "their lovers" there, or single ladies saw some "boyfriend" or "friend" to have a "secret date."¹¹⁶ The couple arrived in a car and immediately found an enormous empty patio. Then the man searched for a free space to park and promptly went up to the room with his companion. Afterwards, he would head to an office at the back of the patio where he paid for the room. At the end of their encounter, the couple left the same way they had arrived. *Detectives* warned its readers about the use of these places because the staff or owners had accomplices that followed the couple. As soon as the two were separated, the accomplices approached the woman and threatened to reveal where she had been to her parents or husband, in exchange for money or something valuable.¹¹⁷ Two years later, the newspaper *La Prensa* reported on a band of former agents from the Health Inspection Office who had the same *modus operandi* when blackmailing "the 'sinners'" [las pecadoras].¹¹⁸ In both cases, the targets for extortion were women, as infidelity or the practice of sexuality outside marriage would have profound consequences affecting their closest social circles. On the other hand, men showing the same behavior were never punished with social rejection.

In those years, the fundamental characteristics that separated "decent" and respectable women from those worthy of being despised were virginity, abnegation, sacrifice, joyless sexuality and maternity within marriage. Cinema and literature of that time contain numerous examples of women who, after falling into *inappropriate* sexual conduct, caused disgrace and dishonor for the family. In the popular movie *Nosotros los Pobres* [We, the Poor], Pepe *el toro*, the protagonist, had a sister called

¹¹⁶ ["mujeres casadas con sus amantes" o chicas solteras en compañía de algún "novio" o "amigo" para tener "citas a escondidas"]

¹¹⁷ Renato D'Herblay, "Mercado de Carne Humana," *Detectives*, 237, April 12, 1937, 28-29.

¹¹⁸ Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada. Sección: Recortes. "Auténticos Agentes del Dep. de Salubridad Aparecen Complicados en la Extorsión a las Pecadoras," *La Prensa*, March 16, 1939.

Yolanda, who is seduced by a millionaire. From this illicit relationship a girl is born, and Pepe *el toro* decides to raise her as his own, since his sister is disowned for bringing shame to the family. Yolanda and Pepe's mother's disgust is so great that she is struck with complete paralysis, and the rejection by the family is such that Yolanda's daughter believes her mother is dead and takes flowers to a false grave.¹¹⁹ In *Detectives*, Andrés Gómez told the story of a woman abandoned by her boyfriend when he finds out that she is pregnant. She was a bilingual secretary, but as it was impossible to hide her pregnancy beyond the fourth month she had to leave her job. Her mother stopped talking to her for two years even though they still lived in the same house; not even the fact that the baby was born dead made them reconcile. From then on, the woman could not find a job: "bad luck struck [...] there is something that denounces the woman who has lost what makes her respectable."¹²⁰ The two stories had a clear message for their audience: aside from exclusion and scorn, the women could end up as street prostitutes, since dishonesty marked them forever.

In this context, any women's sexual conduct that was out of the established rules was considered a fault that had to be kept in absolute secrecy. Located in a nice area of the city, discrete rooming houses were an option for middle and high-class couples with cars and the economic resources to pay hourly for a room. The room rates, apart from allowing women anonymity at the entry during check-in and thus avoiding questioning looks, let them distinguish themselves from prostitutes, physically and morally. In the letter to the president from the "bachelors," love was the motive for the women who visited the places in question, not money, nor sexual desire. The name given to the places implied a dissociation with the word *hotel* and its connection with sexual commerce.¹²¹ However, for the press and for many readers, discrete rooming houses were an affront

¹¹⁹ *Nosotros Los Pobres*. Directed by Ismael Rodríguez. Mexico City: Productora Tepeyac, 1948.

¹²⁰ "Las Irregulares," *Detectives*, September 3, 1934, no. 108, pp. 4-17. [me persiguió la mala suerte [...] hay algo que denuncia a la mujer que ya ha perdido lo que la hace respetable]

¹²¹ According to my experience as an inhabitant of Mexico City, even nowadays it is common for young and adult sexually active women to consider that only prostitutes go to love hotels.

to morality in the city. Articles frequently focused on women who had “love affairs on the quiet” as the main users of these places.¹²²

The closure of discrete rooming houses and hotels began to appear in the print media at the beginning of the 1940s, when the fight against procuring started. Some reports clearly stated that gender would dictate the treatment of the clients of both these spaces, which would be labelled as sites of prostitution by authorities. The houses were closed down and their owners arrested in a raid conducted at the luxurious Insurgentes and Lomas de Chapultepec areas in December of 1943. The operation took place at 10:30 a.m. “with the purpose of avoiding scandal, as at this hour the usual clientele, couples in love, were not at the ‘discreet houses.’” The police chief told the press that there were around 300 sites of this type in the city which would be gradually closed down. A journalist asked the official about what would happen “to the loving couples [caught] at the ‘hotels per hours.’” The chief replied that women found in the rooms, regardless of their identity, would be detained and “considered as responsible for practicing prostitution,” while men, “who would not be reached by any [legal] responsibility,” would be released immediately.¹²³ City police closed down ten love hotels a couple of days later; this time, in the city center at dawn. Police agents arrested ten men, all of them owners or managers of the hotels, and 37 women who had been “taken by surprise in the premises.”¹²⁴

Both articles, published within days of each other in *El Universal*, despite being part of a series of reports concerning the closure of hotels, had different aims. The variations in the time when the operations were carried out, the areas, and the consequences, suggest that the first article was intended to be a cautionary tale for middle and high-class women who frequented those houses. The

¹²² [amores de tapadillo]

¹²³ “Clausura de Hoteles Equívocos,” *El Universal*, December 17, 1943, pp. 1, 16 (Segunda Sección) [“a fin de evitar escándalos, pues a esa hora las ‘casas discretas’ se encuentran sin su habitual clientela de parejitas enamoradas”/“a las parejas de enamorados en los ‘hoteles por horas’”/“consideradas como responsables de ejercer la prostitución”, mientras que los hombres “a quienes no les alcanza responsabilidad [legal] alguna”, quedarían en libertad]

¹²⁴ “Más Hoteles Equívocos se Han Cerrado,” *El Universal*, December 20, 1943, pp. 1,8 (Segunda Sección) [sorprendidas en el interior]

subsequent raid confirmed the statements by the police chief, as they arrested several women who were inside the love hotels but released the men who accompanied them. Women detained during the city center raids were likely sex workers, although possibly some among them were not, as it occurred at the closure of the “Alcázar” and “Eslava” hotels in June, 1944, and January, 1945. The first was closed “because that hotel is often visited by couples from diverse social classes, and *also* there are women in the area around [...] who practice prostitution.” At “Eslava”, Teresa López Rendón—who assured she was a waitress—was arrested. That day Teresa left the movie theater in the company of Narciso Chávez, and they decided to finish their date at the aforementioned hotel, where police found them.¹²⁵ Even if the women had been prostitutes, they broke no laws, as the regulations only punished “those who in a scandalous way invited another into carnal commerce,” which seems unprovable when the negotiation had already taken place.¹²⁶ This moralizing campaign offensive against women using those places to have sexual intercourse outside home and outside marriage was justified by the changes in Article 207 of the Penal Code. Aside from the legal justification to punish pimping, several social actors joined forces under the argument of protecting morals and *good habits* from the damage that prostitution did to society. This occurred at the same time a general campaign was launched against alcohol, some movies and “obscene” [obscenas] publications, also considered immoral.

The Congress against Vice was soon held, with the aim of discussing these perceived threats to society. Authorities from all levels and several experts gathered in February, 1944, to deliver speeches and conferences on the best way to combat diverse social ills, procuring among them. The newspaper *Exclésior* promoted and supported the initiative, in addition to giving it full coverage in its

¹²⁵ “Fuentefría Expósito Venancio” (1944), AHCM, Fondo: Penitenciaría, Sección: Cárceles, Expedientes de Reos, Caja: 814, Exp. 4399; “Rodríguez Fernández José” (1945), Fondo: Penitenciaría, Sección: Cárceles, Expedientes de Reos, Caja: 855, Exp. 260. Emphasis mine.

¹²⁶ *Diario Oficial*, February 14, 1940, CXVIII, no. 37, 2. [“porque dicho hotel es frecuentado por parejas de distintas clases sociales y además hay mujeres en las afueras [...] que se dedican a la prostitución”/ “al que de modo escandaloso invite a otro al comercio carnal”]

pages. Concha de Villarreal, a journalist from the newspaper, had written about the different maneuvers hoteliers had tried to keep their businesses operating some months before.¹²⁷ Her articles, written in a clear, denunciating tone, appeared in papers for several months. Some of them provoked the reply of hotel sector members, who, during the congress, were harshly criticized for avoiding the efforts of “social prophylaxis” [profilaxis social] promoted by the state. Unlike brothels and call houses—which by then had failed at continuing operations under the law’s protection on several occasions—, hoteliers used the legality of their establishments and the morality of their guests in their favor. They counted on the support of associations like the Chamber of the Hotel Industry, a group that had included love hotels as well as luxurious hotels since the time of regulated prostitution.¹²⁸

Hoteliers contacted Mexico City’s Regent, Javier Rojo Gómez, as well as President Manuel Ávila Camacho as a reaction to the “Campaign against Vice” [Campaña contra el Vicio]. Members of diverse associations interviewed Gómez to congratulate him on the campaign against vice exploitation, and to offer their support for purging the sector of those members who did not comply with the law.¹²⁹ Perhaps this was a strategic move, as they had been the target of harsh criticism, and it could be anticipated that faultfinding would continue at the upcoming congress. “Mexico City’s Office of Hotel Owners, Restaurants and Alike Advocate” wanted to have an audience with the president to present their posture towards the reunion against vice, which focused on three basic points. Firstly, they claimed the call to the congress was “a demonstration of the failure of the cruelty initiated not long ago;” thus, they requested the suspension of closures and detentions. They also asked for the widening of the themes to be discussed so that they could

¹²⁷ Concepción Noriega de Villarreal (Concha de Villarreal, 1910-1956) collaborated on diverse publications apart from *Excelsior* like *Orbe*, *Sucesos*, *Todo*, *Revista de Revistas*, among others. She was also a prominent poet and novelist. Her career as a journalist started in 1930 focusing on field workers, defenseless children, and on women. Aurora M. Ocampo (dir), *Diccionario de Escritores Mexicanos* (Mexico, UNAM, 2002), 29-30.

¹²⁸ Renato D’Herblay, “Mercado de Carne Humana,” *Detectives*, March 29, 1937, no. 241, pp. 22-23.

¹²⁹ Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada. Sección: Recortes. Concha de Villarreal, “Hoteleros que Apoyan la Campaña Contra el Vicio,” *Excelsior*, December 23, 1943.

analyze “the [...] vice and its relation with sexual issues.” Lastly, they advised to account for the presence of all social groups, not only “rigid moralists [...] nor policymakers with big dreams.”¹³⁰

The failure hoteliers referred to in the first point was the intense raids from the government against places to practice prostitution, as now it was the hotels’ turn. As mentioned before, street prostitution became more visible as a result of raids against brothels and call houses. Neighbors, journalists, and others in favor of banning sexual commerce in any form considered the growing presence of street sex workers a cause for alarm. They constantly requested the closing of places where prostitutes worked under the argument, for instance, that the women stationed in hotels damaged society with their “immoral example” [ejemplo inmoral]. Additionally, they argued, minors were corrupted in these places, including young men who became inebriated, and left books or clothes as security for using the rooms.¹³¹ Other voices, like the hoteliers’, argued that prostitution was still a necessary ill, and difficult to eradicate, so it was better to have it regulated. Clients like the “bachelors” even considered hotels as places through which prostitutes could get away from exploitation at brothels. For almost all of the aforementioned social groups, a total ban on sexual commerce or its regulation would be a direct benefit. Neighbors would avoid people they regarded as undesirable, clients would be able to continue frequenting places for sexual relief without fear of raids, and hoteliers would keep their businesses running and profitable. In this debate, the center of discussion was morality, rather than exploiting sex workers, trafficking women, or forcing prostitution, and this served as a weapon for hoteliers as well as for their detractors. Under this logic, the last two points in the list of demands by the hoteliers aimed to ensure that discussions included topics or representatives that could benefit them. They requested to delve into sexuality,

¹³⁰ “Los Hoteleros Lenones Esperan aún Triunfar,” *La Prensa*, January 6, 1944, 29. [“Defensoría de Propietarios de Hoteles, Restaurantes y Similares del D.F.”/“muestra del fracaso de la crudeza que se inició no hace mucho”/“el [...] vicio y su relación con los problemas sexuales”/“moralistas rígidos [...] ni técnicos románticos”]

¹³¹ “Vecinas de la Santa Veracruz y 2 de Abril al Jefe del Departamento de Salubridad Pública” (1941), AGN, Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho [187], Caja: 381 A; “La Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia a Manuel Ávila Camacho” (1944), Fondo: Dirección General de Gobierno 2014(29), Caja: 1, Exp. 1.

although they were careful enough to present it in a negative sense, that is, highlighting “the problems” caused by it and its connection with vice. The “rigid moralists” and “romantic technicians” that hoteliers wanted to counter-balance included those in charge of designing laws and executing them, those who sought total suppression of prostitution and vice, and also those who had made evident their strategies to avoid the law.

It would not be odd that when writing their proposal to the president, hoteliers considered Concha de Villarreal, who had become one of their fiercest attackers from the pages of *Excelsior*. The journalist often advocated the extinction of prostitution, especially during the months before the Congress against Vice took place. De Villarreal wrote of a concern that “the abolitionist regime had not been appl[ied] due to the lack of energy from the administrative, police and judicial authorities,” who allowed hoteliers and pimps to live off the prostitution of hundreds of women in the city center. Over-tolerance from authorities degraded the morals of decent guests who stayed in love hotels “by mistake.”¹³² For de Villarreal and other attendees of the Congress against Vice, the real “abolition” of prostitution would be achieved as prostitutes became practically invisible to the eyes of passers-by. This opinion was debated at length at the congress; in some conferences they even questioned where sex workers would go if all the places they work in were closed down. Other people attending the congress, like the Health Department delegate, replied by saying that only those who did not know what “abolitionist regime” [régimen abolicionista] meant could raise this kind of question. Other speakers like doctor Samuel Villalobos suggested stricter measures against women wandering the streets in a “shameless and dishonest” [descarada y deshonest] way, making the city look like a tolerance zone due to the absence of police action. In her articles, de Villarreal clearly stated she agreed with the “abolitionist” tendency: not only dismantling the regulations and

¹³² Concha de Villarreal, “El Centro de la Ciudad Está Convertido En Una Zona Roja,” *Excelsior*, November 8, 1943, p. 10. [“el régimen abolicionista [...] no se aplica[ra] por falta de energía de las autoridades administrativas, policiales y judiciales”/“que por equivocación”]

institutions with which the state controlled prostitution, but punishing any practice that promoted commercial sex. Regarding prostitutes, de Villarreal wrote “society forgives them, does not chase them, in exchange for them, the irredeemable, not offending public morals and good habits.”¹³³ The journalist’s fierce criticism did not center on sex workers, whom she considered “victims” of extortion from the police and their pimps, but on those who continued profiting from their commerce, particularly hoteliers.¹³⁴

As de Villarreal defended a prohibitionist position, completely opposed to regulations that supported hoteliers, and also thanks to her argumentative ability as well as the use of decrees to back her up, her articles for *Excelsior* constitute an important source of information. Through them we can analyze the way in which love hotel owners made use of legal strategies together with moral arguments for their defense. Unlike call houses or brothels, where prostitution was carried out in plain sight, hotels could count on ambiguity, since authorities argued it was necessary to investigate thoroughly to make sure which must be closed down for facilitating prostitution. When closures loomed, hoteliers’ lawyers obtained protection, arguing that visitors, “honorable people who [did] not know the city”, chose hotels innocently, and the “women or young girls” from these families could not be denied entry or be regarded as prostitutes without foundation.¹³⁵ At the Congress against Vice a plenary session centered on procuring, discussing “the hoteliers’ legitimate rights,” as well as what should be done if they allowed prostitution inside their businesses. There were two sides at the meeting: one requested the suspension of the right of injunction for those who lived off sexual commerce, and another that held that under no circumstance should constitutional guarantees

¹³³ Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada. Sección: Recortes. Concha de Villarreal, “Reúnen dos millones para su defensa,” *Excelsior*, n.d. [la sociedad las perdona, no las persigue, a cambio de que ellas, las irredentas, no ultrajen la moral pública y las buenas costumbres]

¹³⁴ Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada. Sección: Recortes. Concha de Villarreal, “Los Hoteleros Trataron de Cohechar a la Procuraduría,” *Excelsior*, January 17, 1944.

¹³⁵ “Mueven Su Influencia Para No Clausurarse Hoteles y Cabarets,” *La Prensa*, April 15, 1940, pp. 2, 12; “Lluvia de Amparos de Hoteles y Casas de Huéspedes,” *La Prensa*, April 17, 1940, p. 20. [“personas honorables que no conocen la ciudad”/“señoras o señoritas”]

be suspended.¹³⁶ As mentioned earlier, discussions also introduced the issue of hotel licenses, as when owners or managers were arrested and declared guilty or innocent, their hotels were reopened because the buildings maintained permission to operate.¹³⁷ Liberty was one of the arguments used by the judges in offering hoteliers leniency, said de Villarreal. It was not until the end of 1944 that the Second Penal Court determined that punishing procuring did not restrict “the freedom to love, nor [did] it violate the right to practice erotic faculties.”¹³⁸

The articles also suggest that just like madames, hotel owners used illegal methods to make sure businesses kept on operating. The press reported bribery of medium and high range authorities to avoid closure, as well as community police warning hotel operators when Judicial Police were to carry out raids.¹³⁹ In February 1944, de Villarreal claimed that the Chamber of Hotels president, Ricardo Basurto, had appeared at the Health Office, in the times of regulated prostitution, to threaten, “**gun in hand [...], an office boss**” saying the latter had ordered inspection of all his hotels.¹⁴⁰ Just a couple of days later, Basurto asked *El Universal* to publish a letter in which he denied de Villarreal’s accusations; according to Basurto, things had happened in a completely different way. As a result of an “arbitrary” [arbitraria] action taken against his hotel, he went to the Health Office and made a “measured” complaint; however, the Chief of Health Agents got so angry at the complaint that he took out a gun and threatened to kill Basurto in the office. For Basurto this event represented “the abuse and arbitrariness that the members of the National Chamber of Hotels

¹³⁶ “Todo el Rigor de la Ley Para los Que Trafican Con el Vicio,” *Excelsior*, February 14, 1944, pp. 1, 7. [los derechos legítimos de los hoteleros]

¹³⁷ “Todo el Rigor de la Ley Para los Que Trafican Con el Vicio,” *Excelsior*, February 14, 1944, pp. 1, 7; “42 Antros de Vicio Fueron Cerrados Ayer,” *El Universal*, February 14, 1944, pp. 1,6; Concha de Villarreal, “La Asamblea Contra el Vicio Debe Ser Eco de la Opinión,” February 15, 1944, pp. 1, 15.

¹³⁸ Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada. Sección: Recortes. Concha de Villarreal, “Ejemplar Sentencia de la Segunda Corte Penal,” *Excelsior*, November 20, 1944. [“la libertad de amar ni viola[ba] el derecho de ejercitar las facultades eróticas”]

¹³⁹ Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada. Sección: Recortes. Concha de Villarreal, “Los Hoteleros Trataron de Cohechar a la Procuraduría,” *Excelsior*, January 17, 1944.

¹⁴⁰ Concha de Villarreal, “La Asamblea Contra el Vicio Debe Ser Eco de la Opinión Pública,” *Excelsior*, February 14, 1944, pp. 15. [“**pistola en mano [...] al jefe de una oficina**”] Emphasis in the original.

suffered from authorities.”¹⁴¹ We will probably never know the true version, but what stands out in both cases is the use of violence, the threats and weapons used to sort out misunderstandings between two men who represented, on the one hand, authority, and, on the other, those affected by the laws regulating prostitution. In his letter, Basurto did not mention that he had taken legal action regarding the abuse he allegedly suffered. He did ask de Villarreal to show names and proof of this and other accusations against him that included drug trafficking, white slavery and bribery; otherwise, he would take legal action against her and *Excelsior*.¹⁴²

Actions against hotels as well as detentions of all their workers —owners, managers, porters and cleaning staff— increased after the Congress against Vice was held. Undercover agents delivered reports they considered damning enough to close down the establishments. Evidence included interviews of some clients or people in charge, the presence of sex workers by hotel doors or nearby, even the time that couples spent inside the rooms (usually half an hour). The guilt of the accused was generally determined by self-incriminating testimony. Merely mentioning their position at the hotel, either as owners or people in charge, or saying to the judge that they had provided towels or soap to the customers, was enough to be found guilty of facilitating the prostitution of others.¹⁴³ The raids were limited to the early 1940s by the end of the decade, hotels and cabarets were still a cause for complaints from those worried about the increase in street prostitution. A man identified as R. Silva complained about the lack of safety in the city because police officers, in uniforms or as secret

¹⁴¹ “Carta del Presidente de la Cámara Hotelera,” *El Universal*, February 17, 1944, pp. 1, 9 (Primera Sección) [reclamó “mesuradamente”/“los abusos y arbitrariedades a que estaba[n] sometidos los miembros de la Camara Nacional de Hoteles por parte de las autoridades”]

¹⁴² “Carta del Presidente de la Cámara Hotelera,” *El Universal*, February 17, 1944, pp. 1, 9 (Primera Sección)

¹⁴³ “Sarabia Calleja Martín” (1944), Caja: 792, Exp. 1160; “Rosete Martínez Maximina” (1944) Caja: 792, Exp. 1171; “Meneses Aguilar María” (1944), Caja: 801, Exp. 2481; “Fuentefrías Expósito Venancio” (1944), Caja: 814, Exp. 4399; “Terrazas Heller Félix” (1944) Caja: 828, Exp. 6459; “Diez Moran Ramón” (1944) Caja: 833, Exp. 7285; “Rodríguez Fernández José” (1944), Caja: 855, Exp. 260. All documents belong to: AHDF, Fondo: *Penitenciaría*, Sección: *Cárceles*, *Expedientes de reos*.

agents, gathered around “grotty” hotels, the ones offering time “by the hour.”¹⁴⁴ In another citizen’s letter, José Gomes asked to put an end to all the “immoralities” committed on city center streets as a result of the “countless run-down hotels [...] managed by individuals with no scruples who had turned procuring into an easy source of income.” Gomes, like de Villarreal and other contemporaries, argued that these places operated freely thanks to the corruption of police officers who took money from those they ought to punish.¹⁴⁵

The authorities’ fight against procuring at hotels centered on both protecting morality and preventing their employees from facilitating prostitution. Despite the initial aims of fighting procuring and exploitation, the raids did not focus on pimps who coerced sex workers in their rooms. Newspapers, magazines and legal arguments against pimping often pointed at hotels as homes or temporary hideouts of men who pressured women into prostitution using different levels of violence. Several cases of kidnapping and forced prostitution reported at the time (in which both men and women participated) also originated in various hotels of the country. The authorities did not explore the fact that either hoteliers or their employees might have known about sexual exploitation, and they did not use these elements to incriminate pimps. The authorities’ attention towards hotels had reduced considerably by the end of the 1940s, according to judicial files. Silva’s and Gomes’s letters described the increased raids against street prostitutes as a consequence of moralizing campaigns launched by Ernesto P. Uruchurtu, mayor of the city for 14 years, from 1952 to 1966. During the first years of Uruchurtu’s administration various city center hotels were closed down, but owners managed to reopen them soon after by using resources from the 1940s: association, injunction and extortion of police officers. Police operations were constantly present in

¹⁴⁴ “Carta del Señor R. Silva al Secretario Particular del Presidente” (1948), Fondo: Presidentes, Miguel Alemán Valdés, Caja: 0617 (551.1/57-553/26). [los hoteles “de mala muerte, los de ratos”]

¹⁴⁵ “Carta de Jose Gomes al Presidente” (1950), AGN, Fondo: Presidentes, Miguel Alemán Valdés, Caja: 0617 (551.1/57-553/26). [inmoralidades/“infinitud de hoteluchos [...] regenteados por individuos sin escrúpulos que han hecho del lenocinio una fuente fácil de ingresos”]

the streets during those years, as moralizing efforts to abolish prostitution centered on clearing the city of sex workers. The “loving couples” using “courts” (types of hotels) at the outskirts of the city—that may have acted as substitute discrete rooming houses— also called the attention of moralizers at that time.¹⁴⁶



Women offering their services in the streets, cabarets or bars worked as prostitutes at numerous love hotels in the city center. Hotels still admitted couples without baggage and rented rooms hourly, contrary to the provisions of authorities. Hoteliers had advertised with illuminated signs since the times of regulated prostitution, despite the law prohibiting the use of the word “hotel” on facades to avoid *honest* people mingling with habitual guests, generally persons linked to crime and immorality. The rooms, often in poor condition, only had a bed and basic cleaning items; in the painting, a soap bar and a towel can be seen. Such articles were used by authorities to determine the staff’s guilt, by accusing them of providing elements to promote sexual commerce, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. **Figure 10.** Emilio Baz-Viaud, *En el Cuarto de Hotel* [In the Hotel Room] (1941).

Conclusion

During the first half of the twentieth century, prostitution was mainly concentrated in the city center and in surrounding areas like the Roma neighborhood. The urban landscape included numerous brothels, love hotels, *accesorias* and sex workers along the avenues and public gardens. Sexual services for all tastes and budgets were offered in these places. It was possible to find a wider range of options downtown, and in the Roma neighborhood it was necessary to pay high prices in order to

¹⁴⁶ Personal conversation with Sara Minerva Luna Elizarrarás, student at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, who is currently writing her doctoral thesis on moralizing campaigns in Mexico City during Uruchurtu’s government, under Gabriela Cano’s supervision.

have access to its luxurious brothels. These spaces mirrored the heterogeneous population generated by the accelerated growth of the city towards the 1940s: migrants from different parts of the country moved to the capital city in search for a job. As a consequence, the center began to fill with more and more people, and, gradually, the wealthy started to abandon the area. Nevertheless, its role as a cultural, tourist and economic nucleus lasted for many years. Men from different social classes were regular clients of sexual commerce offered on its main streets. Despite the state's efforts to control and conceal prostitution, this business expanded at the same pace the population. Neighbors and passers-by complained, quite often, because they did not want to share the streets with those who undermined the morality of the city.

Between 1939 and 1940 several elements coincided in transforming not only the geography of sexual commerce, but also its internal dynamics. The construction of new avenues in order to reduce traffic congestion as well as the end of regulated prostitution resulted in the eviction of sex workers from some of the main streets. The attempt to place them at the city outskirts failed. In spite of the fact that prostitution was not actually criminalized, the urban and legal changes brought on an increase in police extortion. Threats to take street prostitutes to Hospital Morelos continued being effective, although the hospital lost its obligatory confinement status as a result of the end of regulated prostitution. Also, after the discovery of penicillin the menace of syphilis started to lose strength during those years. The raids at brothels began, and prohibition became the norm for such places. As a result, street prostitution increased, as well as abuse from the authorities, and so did the complaints about it all. The most influential madames continued operating clandestinely. For their part, hoteliers got around action from authorities in a more successful way, thanks to diverse legal strategies and their arguments regarding the morality of their businesses and of the clients that frequented them.

The city as a whole, and, particularly, every place linked to prostitution, promoted vigorous debates on sexuality, urbanization and public morals. All of these places, in their way, were spaces for control and resistance. Physicians, social reformers, journalists, neighbors, madames, hoteliers, prostitutes and clients assigned different meanings to each of these sites, and, from their own trenches, they disputed them. Each of the spaces analyzed in this chapter, though connected one with another, offer different clues about the way people lived in the city. Not only was commercial sex part of the urban experience, but it was also a reflection of it, of the mobility of its inhabitants, and of the flexibility of its frontiers. Prostitution, was not a secret, hidden activity, nor was it completely isolated. In the heart of the city and its main neighborhoods, men and women, either connected with prostitution or not, carried out their day-to-day activities. Measures imposed by the state were constantly defied; the people involved presented their arguments based on their particular interpretation of the laws and the way in which the regulations affected the places they gathered in. The 1940s brought in paradigm changes for those who had engaged in prostitution in previous decades. The modification of the activities in Hospital Morelos, the demolition of *acesorias* on some of the main streets, the retreat of brothels back into illegality, and the survival of hotels affected the dynamics of sexual commerce. The defense of the city's morality eclipsed the debates on public health and the rehabilitation of prostitutes: madames lost control of sexual commerce, while prostitution in cabarets, massage houses, bars and in the streets increased, being mainly controlled by pimps. Some *acesorias*, hotels, and some luxurious brothels survived for some more decades. In general, the relation of authority to these places was marked by illegal arrangements and influences: far from disappearing, exploitation as well as sexual work simply adjusted to the new context.

Chapter III

Disinherited from the Revolution: Madames, Prostitutes, and the Struggle for National Belonging, 1920-1945

In Salvador Novo's 1972 essay, "Los burdeles y la decadencia de la conversación" [Brothels and the Decay of Conversation], the 68-year-old remembered when prostitution was a business, mainly controlled by women. Novo, one of the most important chroniclers of Mexico during the first half of the twentieth century, compared brothels/madams with department stores/managers. Like in any other commercial activity, he wrote, an expert manager that had climbed up the corporate ladder was in charge of supplying, renewing, and taking care of the "goods" [mercancías] offered to the costumers. Clients, for their part, could satisfy their needs at a vast array of stores according to their purchasing power: from the luxury department store in an exclusive neighborhood to the small stall located in the humblest area of the city. However, the Mexican state, "domineering and infused with messianic aspirations," abolished such efficient enterprise.¹

Novo's reflections are centered on two main aspects: the limited benefit that the Mexican Revolution gave to prostitutes and *matronas*; and the importance of brothels as social hubs, or private areas where education and conversation occurred. Inside brothels, men had intellectual conversations with other men, and prostitutes were in contact with culture through their clients. Novo, an openly gay man, was not interested in describing the erotic heterosexual nature of bordellos, rather he conceived brothels as inspiration for poets and novelists, and as workplaces for women. According to Novo, while the post-revolutionary state boasted about the achievement of labor rights, prostitutes lost all social guarantees that the government could have offered them as workers, turning these women into "the disinherited of the Revolution" [las desheredadas de la Revolución].² He bemoans the sex trade situation after the prohibition of houses of prostitution in Mexico City and

¹ Salvador Novo, "Los burdeles y la decadencia de la conversación," in *Las locas, el sexo, los burdeles y otros ensayos* (México: Novaro, 1972), 75-7. [dominador e imbuido de mesianismo]

² Salvador Novo, "Los burdeles y la decadencia..." 78.

declares: “how sad is the fate of these women now that they are working without any title or rights: scattered, persecuted [...] a courteous profession once flourished, completely organized inside the brothels.”³

The years Novo remembers longingly began in 1865, when the government established the French System for the control of prostitution and venereal diseases, and ended in 1940 when an official decree revoked the registration of prostitutes and brothels with authorities. The reasons behind the end of the golden age of the sex trade depicted in “Los Burdeles y la Decadencia de la Conversación” can be found in local discussions about prostitution, motivated by revolutionary rhetoric and ideas at the League of Nations concerning the trafficking of women. Two of the most important conclusions of those debates —explained in chapter 1— were the proposition that allowed legal action against intermediary agents, and the prohibition of houses of prostitution, for the sake of the battle against sexual exploitation. As a consequence, and in light of the consolidation of the revolutionary government, the owners of these houses became “anachronistic members” [miembros anacónicos] of the state, and as such, they did not have a place in the new national project.⁴

After the legislative changes in 1940, *lenocinio* [pimping/procuring] was prosecuted ex-officio in Mexico City. In other words, the authorities prosecuted the suspect(s) even if a victim did not report an offence; besides, anyone could report the crime to the police whether or not they had been personally affected.⁵ Raids during the first years of the campaign against procuring produced police stations full of women, mainly owners of important brothels or call houses [*casas de citas*], but also waiters, bartenders, prostitutes and even customers. Testimonies could then be collected from all, and the investigations for *lenocinio* could start. From 1934 to 1939, 71 people were arrested for

³ Salvador Novo, “Los burdeles y la decadencia...” 78. [triste destino el de estas trabajadoras no asalariadas que ahora ejercen sin título y sin garantías: dispersas, perseguidas, [...] el noble servicio que otrora floreció, completamente organizado en los burdeles]

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In order to arrest the offenders, police officers had to be well aware that the offence had been committed.

lenocinio, while from 1940 to 1945, the number rose up to 715 (Tables 1 and 2, Chapter 1).⁶ The sudden change in the prosecution of this activity prompted *matronas* to use several defensive strategies in order to try to revert accusations against them, seeking repeatedly to revoke the law and keep their places running.

This process also affected some men who profited from prostitution: hotel owners were accused in newspapers, while women brought their pimps to the authorities. Here I will focus on what abolition meant to madames and prostitutes (hoteliers and pimps are studied in more detail in chapters 2 and 4) since legislation involved different strategies and results for each gender. *Matronas* worked in enclosed spaces especially created, dedicated, and registered for sexual service before the law, which caused them to see clandestine prostitutes (working individually or under the protection of pimps) as direct competition to their business. Brothels became the direct target of authorities in the 1940s because specialists and legislators considered them as potential housing for victims of trafficking. For their part, independent legal prostitutes often worked in one-rooms known as *accessorias* located on streets dedicated to commercial sex. For them, the major threat came from big urban changes that city authorities implemented in 1938. The opening of new avenues –explained in chapter 2– prompted several disputes over spaces that had belonged in the tolerance zone.

The reaction of madames, brothel prostitutes, and street solicitors to the legal and urban changes that affected their occupation was immediate. The focus will center on the defense tactics they chose in order to keep working under the new conditions. The analysis will show that, even with all the disadvantages of the French System, prostitutes of high and low status operating under this scheme shared a conception of labor that was protected through group organization and legal maneuvers. City expansion and the end of state-regulated prostitution diminished the power of negotiation between women involved in sex trade and the government. This chapter is divided in

⁶ AHDF, Fondo: Penitenciaría, Sección: Cárceles, Expedientes de reos, delito: lenocinio (1934-1952).

three sections to show how these processes affected the agency of madames and sex workers regardless of their class, and also with the objective of highlighting some of the main differences in the city's prostitution milieu. The first two sections explain strategies closely related to the rhetoric and legal elements of the Mexican government just after the 1910 Revolution. *Matronas* and street prostitutes employed elements of revolutionary nationalism such as xenophobia, injunction [*derecho de amparo*], and freedom of association, to be recognized as part of the state and to have all legal rights thereof. The first section will analyze madames' efforts to be recognized as compatriot members of society by incorporating xenophobia into their discourses, with the goal of diverting authorities' attention from foreign ownership of houses of prostitution, so Mexicans could avoid punishment as much as possible.

The Constitution of 1917 was another achievement boasted about by the revolutionary government, and the right to injunction was still guaranteed by the *Carta Magna*, which also gave workers and peasants freedom of association in labor unions. The second section will explain how brothel owners, independent prostitutes, and their lawyers used the *amparo* to be treated as residents with certain rights.⁷ This section will also highlight some of the debates around the appropriateness of granting protection to women that were perceived as immoral or, in the case of the madames, as criminals. The last part of this chapter will explore strategies mainly used by rich brothel owners. Their economic status and contacts allowed them to suggest strategies under the logic of the state, such as the creation of a hospital for the treatment of venereal diseases using their own resources but under the supervision of the government. Nevertheless, probably the most impressive move was their attempt to form a union in order to protect the free exercise of their profession. They were supported by two important officials, one of whom had worked as the secretary of labor [*Secretario del Trabajo*] during the six-year presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, while the other had worked as attorney

⁷ Some colleagues have suggested it would be the equivalent to "injunction" in U.S. law.

general [*Procurador de Justicia*].

The efforts of sex workers and madames' were not rewarded as they expected. Prostitution was not regulated again and most of the brothels in Mexico City, as they were known up to then, vanished from the urban landscape. This does not mean that the fight against pimping was successful or that its practice behind closed doors ended. The increase in street prostitution and clandestine centers (spas, restaurant/bars, etcetera) was a direct consequence of the vanished brothels. Here it will be shown that, even when there were some groups that would not fit into the new national project—as they were considered anachronistic and illegal within the new era—this does not mean that they forced themselves into exile from the state. On the contrary, they adopted, supported and tried to use the new revolutionary rhetoric in their own defense. These women are a clear example of the complex negotiations of nationalism and its contradictions. This chapter is also about the complexity of the sex trade and the short-term consequences of the measures which were ordered by the League of Nations, adopted by the Mexican government, and particularly applied in the capital city.

Aliens in the National Underworld

The two decades preceding the abolition of the laws for the regulation of prostitution were crucial for the construction of nationalism. From 1920 to 1940 the country experienced a gradual pacification period after the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Socially and culturally, the concepts of “being Mexican” [lo mexicano] and “the nation” [lo nacional] underwent significant changes from what they had meant during the Porfiriato. Although it is true that the country experienced radical transformations throughout those decades, nationalist discourse continuously developed and was adopted by almost every social group: political, economic and intellectual elites used it to achieve their political and cultural goals, as much as common citizens (rural or urban) did.⁸

⁸ Ricardo Pérez Montfort, “Indigenismo, Hispanismo y Panamericanismo en la Cultura Popular Mexicana de 1920 a

The new government's focus of rhetoric and action was *el pueblo mexicano* [the Mexican people] who would be the essential protagonist of the Revolution and the main beneficiary of the changes it brought. Unlike the social Darwinist perspective of the Porfiriato, when low-class people were objects of classification and were considered part of the social illnesses of the country, during the first decades of the twentieth century the discourse acknowledged that *el pueblo* was mainly composed of these marginalized groups. Thus, the less favored social classes became both the power behind, and the beneficiary of, all the strategies of the state. At the same time, the desire to define the meaning of "being Mexican" [*lo mexicano*] led to a deep introspection to find the elements that would define the nation. According to some intellectuals, such as Ricardo Pérez Montfort and Claudio Lomnitz, the outcome of this process can be summarized in two aspects: one specifying the characteristics, traditions and history of *el pueblo*, through the ideology of *mestizaje* [race-mixing] (which from those years on turned into the quintessence of what is being Mexican); and the elements labeled as national [*lo nacional*] contrasting Mexico to other countries. This is how it was established not only which elements would be inalienable parts of the nation (for example, natural resources, particularly oil in 1938), but also the constant urgency to defend the motherland against foreign interests, a motherland which was frequently understood "not [as] love for our identity, but hate for the strange," as said in the play *Los alzados* [The Insurrectionists] performed for the first time in 1935. As a result, many social groups were plagued by an open xenophobia.⁹

The world of prostitution did not escape from the manifestations of nationalism, which strengthened during those years. The different people involved (madames, prostitutes, doctors, neighbors, authorities) appealed to the sense of belonging when defending themselves and their interests in the name of the nation. For almost three decades, the discussion of where the houses of

1940," in *Cultura e Identidad Popular*, comp. Roberto Blancarte (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica/Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994), 342-4. [no [como] amor a lo nuestro, sino odio a lo extraño]

⁹ Ibid., 347. See also: Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Cotidianidades, Imaginarios y Contextos: Ensayos de Historia y Cultura en México, 1850-1950* (México: Publicaciones de La Casa Chata, 2008) and Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico Silent Mexico. Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

prostitution should be located, how the law should be applied, and who should be prosecuted for *lenocinio* kept foreigners at the heart of the debate. The charges against them (as well as the occasional defense) came from all levels, from the common citizen to the state. It was the Constitution of 1917 that provided all Mexicans --not just political elites-- with a legal weapon: Article 33.

This article was the result of a radical change in perspective regarding foreigners' role in the Mexican public life after the benefits some of them had during the Porfiriato. The transformation was such that the legislators basically decided to give all authority to the executive branch to expel "pernicious" [perniciosos] foreigners from the country. Without any chance of a trial nor a fair explanation of what would make a foreigner "undesirable," [indeseable] the use of Article 33 "places the foreigner into an extreme situation, since, through its application, all the individual rights given by the Constitution to all the citizens living in the country are revoked."¹⁰

In order for the executive branch to issue a deportation order, it was necessary to catch a foreigner committing a crime, or for someone to lodge a public or private complaint about pretty much anything that could be considered damaging. This way, it was easier to make all sorts of accusations against citizens from other countries, so the complainants could hope for the alien's deportation. Probably, some of these accusations were a product of personal disputes. However, the use of nationalist rhetoric made it seem that citizens were defending the country, and also, that it was necessary for the government to be more severe with foreigners because of their greater harm to the nation.

¹⁰ There is only one explicitly prohibited activity in Article 33 for those foreigners living in Mexico: "they will not be able, by any chance, to get involved in the political issues of the country." It is important to mention that there are other sections in the Constitution that limit the activities of citizens from other countries: Articles 8 and 9 deny their freedom of political association; the first fraction of Article 27 limits their right to property and, until a few years ago, Article 130 denied their freedom to hold religious ministries. Pablo Yankelevich, "Extranjeros indeseables en México (1911-1940). Una aproximación cuantitativa a la aplicación del artículo 33 constitucional," *Historia Mexicana* LIII, 3 (2004): 694-6. [coloca al extranjero en una situación extrema, toda vez que por vía de su aplicación se suspenden las garantías individuales que la constitución otorga a quienes residen en el territorio nacional]

Foreigner was a synonym for danger, even within dangerous contexts *per se*. It was common to see people complaining about brothels using moral arguments, but when a foreigner was involved, a very strong sense of nationalism would arise. The idea of *us* against *them*, while heterogeneous and hard to define, became stronger. For example, in August, 1925 Atilio Cabattini reported the house of prostitution located on Jalisco Avenue 42, in Mexico City. Cabattini owned houses next to the brothel owned by a French woman: Philomene Nadora. According to his letter to the interior secretary [*Secretario de Gobernación*], it had been impossible for him to rent his houses, as no decent person would like to live next to a place where at night “the orgies acquire an unspeakable nature.” However, the brothel had its papers in order and it was registered under the department of health [*Departamento de Salubridad*]. Tired of the situation, Cabattini asked for help from the interior secretary, because of his “morals, righteousness and good manners” (and, very probably, for his ability to influence in the application of Article 33) in the hope he could help him with the situation: “above all, taking into consideration that the income from the rent of this house was the way [he] made a living for [him and his] *Mexican* family.” At the end of his request Cabattini declared that, if the authorities took the time to investigate Philomene Nadora, they would find that “she is a very dangerous woman not only because she is a prostitute,” but because of all the “decent women” who had fallen into this activity due to her tricks.¹¹

On another occasion, the neighbors of Balderas street reported a clandestine house of prostitution. According to the letter addressed to the police chief [*Jefe de la Policía Judicial*], the owner, a French woman, ran a guesthouse where “German, French and other men” lived. There were two rooms in the property, and it was alleged that the men “smear[ed] the reputation of *our* daughters and

¹¹ Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), “Atilio Cabattini acusa a Philomene Nadora de haber establecido una casa de asignación en su propiedad,” Fondo: Dirección General de Gobierno, 2014 (29), Caja: 1, Expediente: 1. Emphasis added. [“las orgías adquieren caracteres inenarrables”/“por su moralidad, rectitud y buenos procederes” /“sobre todo teniendo en cuenta que el producto del alquiler de esa casa es uno de los medios de vida para sostener a mi familia *que es mexicana*”/ “que es una mujer peligrosa no solamente porque ella se dedique a la prostitución”/“mujeres decentes”]

wives.” Apart from saying that this place was a “source of infection,” the signers stated that the house was used by a man called Nicolás Tejada to organize secret meetings, “most probably,” with the intention of rebellion against the government.¹²

Both claims combine some fears about foreigners that were exacerbated by nationalism: their effect on the economic development of the country and the threat to the morality of women and national stability. These ideas combined with the risks of what was represented by the physical spaces where the *necessary evil* was sold: a source of infectious venereal diseases, a home for seditious men and centers for exploitation. However, hostility against foreigners was also generated within those spaces. As mentioned in chapter 1, around 1926 the government enacted the last regulation for the practice of prostitution [*Reglamento para el ejercicio de la prostitución*], which had as one of its main goals a moral change in prostitutes, to whom it offered education and the opportunity to learn a new trade at Hospital Morelos (where they were taken if they suffered from a venereal disease). As said by Katherine E. Bliss, since the beginning of the decade in Mexico City there were efforts to end legal prostitution by increasing the fees the *matronas* had to pay for the right to establish a house or *accesoria* and the monthly fees paid to the state. At the same time, regulators sought for installing porcelain bathroom fixtures and sewage systems in brothels as a way to institute more *hygienic* measures.¹³

As a response to the new regulations, some house-owners and their workers lodged complaints with the president and the interior secretary about the preferential treatment some foreigners received. In this case, their battle was against an old enemy: clandestine prostitution. Since the beginning of the revolutionary governments, several madames had complained about the numerous regulations and taxes they had to pay, while clandestine and independent prostitutes could work in

¹² AGN, Fondo: Secretaría de Gobierno, “Vecinos de Balderas denuncian como casa de prostitución,” Caja: 11, Expediente: 20. Emphasis added. [“alemanes, franceses y otros”/“dejar[an] allí manchada la reputación de *nuestras* hijas y esposas”/“foco de infección”/“seguramente”]

¹³ Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions, Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in the Revolutionary Mexico City* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001): 122-3.

their own houses without such obligations.¹⁴ In both complaints they reported the corruption of the chief inspector of the health department [*Inspector de Sanidad*], the high fees, and the preferential treatment given to clandestine prostitutes, particularly, to those working for foreign pimps.

In the first letter, dated January 25th, 1926, Angela de los Monteros, Emma Zaldívar and “Josefina” identified themselves as “pupils” and stated that the health inspector conformed to the regulations only according to his interests.¹⁵ He asked madames and their workers for fees they could not pay, eventually leading them to work outdoors, causing the disgust of society which, the pupils thought, was right to complain about the streets being full of women of easy virtue. This was followed by a list of thirteen items (part complaints and part petitions) they presented to the president; five were related to foreigners, four were about clandestine prostitution and the rest were about the defense of the owners of guest houses, hotels, and society. Although in the first part of the letter there is no direct mention of the foreigners as competitors, it is pretty clear they wanted them out of business. The first three items they asked for were a regulation restricting foreigners from owning brothels, *casas de citas*, or renting one-room places; the application of Article 33 for being “pernicious”; and for a prohibition of foreign prostitutes entering into the country because they only attracted vice, immorality and pimps moved by greed. In the seventh item they asked to stop property tax increases: “if French prostitutes can pay [...] we, Mexicans, say it is because we have not reached their level of degradation. The *Inspección de Sanidad* can certainly charge them important taxes because what they earn is either product of scam or theft.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (hereafter AHDF), Fondo: Ayuntamiento del Distrito Federal, Sección: Sanidad, vol., 3891, Expediente: 22, Septiembre 29th, 1928; AHDF, Fondo: Ayuntamiento del Distrito federal, Sección: Sanidad, vol., 3894, exp. 187, year: 1917.

¹⁵ As mentioned in chapter one “pupils” [pupilas] was a term commonly used at the beginning of the century as synonym of prostitute.

¹⁶ Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Salud (hereafter AHSS), “Ángela de los Monteros, Emma Zaldívar y Josefina, to the President,” Fondo: Salubridad Pública, Sección: Inspección Antivenérea, Caja: 3, Expediente: 2. [si las francesas pueden pagar [...] decimos las mexicanas, es porque no hemos alcanzado el grado de degradación que éstas ejercen en la prostitución. A estas sí, la H. Inspección de Sanidad puede cobrarles muy fuertes contribuciones, porque ellas lo que ganan o lo estafan o lo roban]

In the second written communication, received four months later at the interior ministry office, Susana Cuevas y María López, requested “very respectfully and on behalf of their partners, an order to deport FRENCH, SPANISH, ARAB, AND TURKISH PERNICIOUS FOREIGNERS and that these ‘apaches’ do not get so many facilities, and the authorities to be less strict with the ‘nationals’.”¹⁷ According to these women, the chief inspector of health [*Inspector de Sanidad*] and the chief of the health police [*Jefe de la Policía Sanitaria*] treated Mexicans contemptuously and asked of them too many requirements to open a brothel and to keep it operating, while foreigners had a lot of privileges within and outside the office of inspection. As mentioned in the letter, pimps could spend as much time as necessary at the health department offices dealing with the matters of “those French women,” while Mexicans were treated “with indifference, despotism and [...] all types of hazing.” They also gave examples of two brothels, property of two Spanish women, Rosario and María Luisa “La Murciana,” who were excused for any fault because of their “mutual agreement” with the authorities, while Mexican brothel-owners were constantly inspected and monitored in a very meticulous way, to ensure that they complied with the new regulations.¹⁸

Five months later, in October, 1926, the chief of public health [*Jefe del Departamento de Salubridad Pública*] defended himself from the “anonymous” accusations by stating that no pimp had been at the health department and asserted that the application of law was equal to everyone, without making any distinction regarding nationality. He also stated that the Spanish women mentioned in the letter had been fined on several occasions. According to him, the foreign prostitutes had been admitted to the Hospital Morelos or sent to jail as often as needed, which caused some of them to decide to

¹⁷ According to Katherine E. Bliss, French journalists first used the term “apache” in 1902, when a group of Parisian pimps became involved in a very violent brawl over a beautiful sex worker. Due to the ferocity of the fight “the press likened them to the fierce warriors of the Mexico-U.S. border.” Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions...*, 142. [my respetuosamente en nombre de [sus] compañeras, se deporten a esos EXTRANJEROS PERNICIOSOS QUE SON DE NACIONALIDAD FRANCESA, ESPAÑOLA, ARABES Y TURCOS y que se les prohíba tanta facilidad a esos ‘apaches’ y que sean menos exigentes las autoridades con los ‘nacionales’]

¹⁸ AGN, “Se quejan contra la Inspección General de Sanidad y el Jefe de la Policía Sanitaria y piden se establezca una zona de Tolerancia,” Fondo: Dirección General de Gobierno, 014(29), Caja: 1, Expediente: 2. Emphasis in the original. [“las francesas”/“indiferencia, despotismo y [...] toda clase de vejaciones”/“entendimiento retribuido”]

return to their home countries. Despite all his arguments, in his written communication he does not deny the preference for foreign prostitutes over the Mexicans: “they [the foreigners] are remarkably punctual in attending their mandatory medical examination, whereas the nationals, especially those of the lowest class, are unwilling to attend their check-ups, making their detention and punishment necessary.” He continued his argument saying that foreigners were more cautious about hygienic measures, which Mexicans “ignore,” [desconocen] and mentioned that the foreigners were careful not to go to work when the doctor recommended some time off, while Mexicans did not pay attention to medical recommendations.¹⁹

In both letters the adoption of nationalist discourse in the *matronas* and their workers’ speech is evident, as well as their attempts to use it for their own benefit. Even in the response given by the chief of health separation between national and foreign was clear, which left no space for any other racial classification which might exist. During most of the twentieth century, “Mexican” was a synonym for “*mestizo*” and vice versa, causing on many occasions, as in rhetoric and other sources, for the nuances regarding race to disappear. This does not mean that there had not been tensions, but, in the case of prostitution, as in many other cases, such tensions created a front of nationalistic defense of the Mexican against the foreigner.

In fact, at that time, many of the ideas about *lenocinio* were closely related to dangers coming from other places. As explained in chapter 1, the discussions concerning prostitution which led to the closure of prostitution houses as well as the legal persecution of the owners and managers, had their origin in the Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children of the League of Nations. Even though the news about trafficking of women started in the nineteenth century, when British reports stated that European women were kidnapped and forced to work in South American

¹⁹ Ibid. [las [extranjeras] son extraordinariamente puntuales en acudir a sus reconocimientos reglamentarios, en tanto que las nacionales, especialmente las de más baja condición social, son remisas para tales reconocimientos, siendo necesarias la aprehensión y los castigos]

brothels, it was in the inter-war period that the League marshaled all legal resources to fight against international criminal organizations. As a result of the conferences and investigations the committee held during the 1920s and 1930s, its members agreed to catalogue “pimping” and “procurement” as an international crime, and, under the argument that the French system had not reduced the spreading of venereal diseases, the committee concluded that the regulation of prostitution was unjustified and that brothels should be closed.²⁰

In Mexico those measures strengthened at the end of the 30s and had a very marked sense of nationalism. Prostitutes stopped being considered as *socially ill* and became *daughters of the nation*; as such, they were to be protected by the state, not exploited by it. The government’s support of the French regulatory system meant the state was linked to a foreign philosophy, and was related to the dictatorship overthrown by the revolution, as well as becoming a beneficiary of the taxes collected from prostitution establishments. Besides, in the context of World War II, the risks related to prostitution were sometimes described as warlike and as a defense against invasion.

Those years, specifically the period from 1940 to 1946, were the years of what is called *Unidad Nacional* [National Unity] which, according to Pérez Montfort, was “more a proposal or a project [...] an exercise of Utopia and not [...] a reality” based on the idea that the territory was at risk of losing its sovereignty, so the call to fight against local or foreign threats was the trigger to social cohesion.²¹ In this context, brothels and all the dangers they represented had the necessary elements to represent a threat in both senses: they were inside the country, but they were often tainted with the practices and people from other countries. It could be said that a sense of “foreignness” [extranjería] was present during the revocation of the regulations for the exercise of prostitution and the criminalization of procuring in Mexico City, both measures turned madames, even the Mexicans,

²⁰ Magaly Rodríguez García, “The League of Nations and the Moral Recruitment of Women,” *International Review of Social History* 57 (20) (2012): 98-119.

²¹ Pérez Montfort, *Cotidianidades, Imaginarios y Contextos*, 439. [una propuesta o un proyecto [...] un ejercicio de voluntad utópica y no tanto [...] una realidad]

into outsiders living apart from the law, and as such, they were persecuted. In a certain way, the fight against brothels became a matter of national security.

While the fight against human exploitation grew in importance during these years, the damage to society caused by venereal diseases was still very significant. In December, 1929, when crimes against health (including venereal contagion) and the criminal code reforms related to child corruption and *lenocinio* were an issue of discussion, jurist Nicéforo Guerrero presented to the senate his opinions about defining the “danger of infection” [peligro de contagio] as a crime. He argued that the state had the obligation to look after the health of its people, and, to that end, it was necessary to take into account the “devastation” that diseases such as syphilis had caused society. He also stated that it was essential to approve *contagio* as a crime because of “the social danger it represent[ed],” which was the same as carrying illegal weapons, gunshots and conspiracy. As a result, the regulations as well as the legal establishment of brothels created a “subclass” which went against the ideas of the revolutionary government.²²

He was not the only official making use of these arguments. As mentioned in chapter 1, in December, 1942, President Manuel Ávila Camacho sent a document to the governors of the different states to ask them to apply health programs as well as laws against *lenocinio* and human trafficking, due to the fact that venereal diseases put the nation at risk. In his letter he affirmed that these diseases caused more inconvenience than any other cause, which led to an important inefficiency of both civil and military elements. Apart from representing the most effective way to disseminate these diseases, brothels “could be used as headquarters of subversive and disloyal agents.” At the same time, he asked governors to pay special attention to the problem, since the

²² “Dictamen del H. Senado de la República al Aprobar la Nueva Legislación Antivenérea Mexicana. Anotaciones por el Doctor Enrique Villela,” *Boletín de Seguridad e Higiene* III, 1 (1940): 457-461. [“estragos”/“por el peligro social que denota[ban]”/ “subclase”]

country was experiencing a moment in which “civil citizens [started] to participate considerably in the efforts to defend the country.”²³

Thus, it is not surprising that the press repeated all the orders given by the government during those years, making it clear to public opinion that the state would not allow foreigners to participate in the issues concerning the country. This is how foreigners were prohibited from owning or managing houses of prostitution, low-class cabarets, hotels and any other place dedicated to sexual services under the threat of the application of Article 33.²⁴ Deportation orders were issued to those foreigners dedicated to “antisocial or pernicious activities and to those with pending accounts with their country of origin [...] meaning, with a dark past or considered as criminals.”²⁵ Such was the case of José Pérez Gómez “El Nili,” manager of a bullfighter with criminal charges in Spain, or that of Manuel Ferrándiz and Antonio Sánchez accused of the performance of plays “mak[ing] fun of public officials and denigrat[ing] the regime.”²⁶ Even the interior ministry ordered the owners of the hotels to give a daily report of those foreigners spending the night within their facilities.²⁷

Maybe not as many enemies were threatening the stability of the nation as was claimed in discussions. Mexico did not have an active immigration policy to populate the country as Argentina did, for example. It is possible that the mix between *mestizaje* and xenophobia as basic components of Mexican nationalism caused foreigners to be noticed even if they were not so numerous. In the environment of regulated prostitution, particularly, in the statistical data related to the owners of places of sexual commerce, Mexican prostitutes outnumbered, by far, those from other countries.

²³ “Recientemente me dirigí a todos los gobiernos,” 1942, AGN, Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho, Expediente: 462.3155 [“podían ser utilizados como agencias o base de operaciones de agentes subversivos y desleales”/ “la población civil [comenzaba] a tomar una participación considerable en las actividades de la defensa nacional”]

²⁴ “Los Extranjeros que Explotan Lenocinios van a ser Expulsados,” *La Prensa*, February 10, 1940, pp. 2, 21.

²⁵ “Más Detenciones se han Hecho de Extranjeros,” *El Universal*, November 28, 1943, p.15. [actividades antisociales o perniciosas y contra quienes tienen cuentas pendientes en su nación de origen [...] es decir, cuyos antecedentes sean turbios o francamente delictuosos]

²⁶ Ibid. [mak[ing] fun of public officials and denigrat[ing] the regime]

²⁷ “Los Hoteles Informarán sobre la Salida y Entrada de Extranjeros,” *La Prensa*, August 9, 1942, p. 2.

In a document about “white-slave traders” [tratantes de blancas] requested by the interior ministry in 1938 from the health department, data showed that of 188 women owners of prostitution houses, only 14 were foreigners. Nevertheless, the data regarding clandestine prostitution is unclear. Men living off prostitution (those “apaches” mentioned in the letters of 1926) did not appear in this document because according to the inspector who wrote it, they were not registered at the health department: “they always hide from the authorities and, in fact, it is the [Mexico City] police headquarters that has catalogued them as vague individuals and ‘souteneurs’.”²⁸ Since that time, the League of Nations had reported that foreign prostitutes worked in *accesorias* as well as independently, so as not to share their earnings with the madames, and that many of them had arrived in Mexico accompanied by a pimp. Therefore, it was likely that once in their new homes, they made up a team with those pimps for long periods.²⁹

This is how foreigners, being clandestine prostitutes or pimps, represented a direct threat to the business of legal prostitution, mostly in the control of Mexican women. In practical terms, the earnings of the Mexican were reduced, not only due to the increased competition foreigners represented, but also because being independent or working illegally meant the latter did not have to pay fees to the government. At the same time, procurers (*lenones*) in general, men or women, national or foreign, were presented as a danger to the morals and security of the country. Although the government addressed the menaces coming from outside, the madames who negotiated with the state for over seven decades became, from 1940 on, strangers within the heart of the nation. From the moment the government prohibited brothels and criminalized prostitution in Mexico City, these women were out of the discourse, though they themselves continued to try to engage the discourse.

²⁸ “Registro de Casas de Citas y Casas de Asignación Registradas en el Departamento Anti-Venéreo de Salubridad Pública,” 1938, AGN, Fondo: Secretaría de Gobernación, Caja: 442, Expediente: 8. In the report there is only one (Mexican) man, owner of one of the assignation houses. [se ocultan siempre de las autoridades y más bien la Jefatura Central de Policías del [Distrito Federal] los tiene catalogados en la lista de individuos vagos y ‘souteneurs’]

²⁹ League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children*, 2 parts, (Geneva, 1927), Part II, 119-21. I thank Benjamin Bryce for locating this source at Robarts Library, University of Toronto.

Xenophobia was only one of the resources used by the *matronas* from Mexico City in their attempt to reintegrate themselves into a system that, with the help of the League of Nations, had decided to keep them out of the revolutionary project.



Figure 11. As a result of legislative changes in 1940 that criminalized procurement and pimping, officers closed prostitution houses in Mexico City in numbers never seen before. *Agentes del Ministerio Público al Cancelar un Prostíbulo*, (Officers Closing a Brothel), Fondo Casasola, Fototeca Nacional, Mexico City, Número de Inventario 70697, ca. 1930.

Where do we go?

With the aim to prevent the closure of their businesses, prostitutes and madames took different actions within the legal framework the state offered. Some decades ago they had learned to work in teams to defend their common causes, and to hire lawyers to represent them when their interests

were affected.³⁰ In the light of the new efforts of the government to close brothels as well as the tolerance zone, *matronas* and sex workers managed to stall the legal process against them, and keep working for some months by using the *derecho de amparo*.³¹

The already-mentioned right, found in Article 103 of the Constitution, instructs the Federation Courts to solve any problem caused “by laws or acts violating individual rights.”³² The *derecho de amparo*, originally created to defend citizens against any abuse of authority, has been used *ad nauseam* by many individuals, from common citizens to ex-governors and businessmen. Nowadays, injunction petitions are still frequently used by persons which helped by some lawyers and judges, are able to avoid their apprehension or are enabled to work illegally for years, because the duration of the process is unknown. Having the constitutional protection signed by a judge, they gain time and freedom for their companies and/or practices.³³ Because of the familiarity the madames had with the request of *amparo*, this was the most commonly used legal action during the first months of brothel prohibition. Newspapers narrated the “request-storm” received by the authorities, reflecting, in a certain way, the confusion surrounding the derogation of legal prostitution, the corruption within such an environment, as well as the criticism by some social sectors regarding the role of the state in the protection of “exploiters” and “dealers of white female slaves,” which, supposedly, the state was trying to punish, employing methods that were not so welcomed by public opinion.³⁴

In April, 1940, when the prohibition of the places dedicated to prostitution took place, “the sad and distrustful city [become] sadder and more distrustful,” since, according to a journalist, from that moment “the almighty Government” had wanted to transform the capital into “the most moral,

³⁰ AHDF, “Salvador Hernández en representación de más de veinte propietarias de burdeles y casas de asignación” (1918) Fondo: Ayuntamiento del Distrito Federal, Sección: Sanidad, vol., 3891, Expediente: 22.

³¹ Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions...*, 201-3.

³² Ignacio Burgoa, *El Juicio de Amparo* (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1983), 173-86. The “authority” must be understood as part of the state, represented by an official or a collegiate body, who has the task to modify, erase or create laws within the state regime. [por leyes o actos de autoridad que violen las garantías individuales]

³³ Leo Zuckermann. “Se abusó del amparo; ahora se modifica (¿para bien?),” *Excelsior*, February 13, 2013, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/leo-zuckermann/2013/02/13/884011> (accessed July 26th, 2013).

³⁴ [“Lluvia de solicitudes”/ “explotadores”/ “tratantes de blancas”]

pure and chaste city of the world [...] by decree [even knowing] the efficiency of those decrees.”³⁵

With a sarcastic tone, the author assured that the citizens should not worry anymore, because prostitutes would have “hygiene workshops were they [would] lose their nail polish and, in exchange, [would] get moral, health and honorable wages.” For those women showing resistance to the change, “a group of kind inspectors [...] with good manners and apostolic vocation” would be in charge of them while any men ‘with or without uniform’ who dared to break the law would be severely punished. Regarding “decent women,” they should be at home before nightfall because “as apostolic as he can be, an inspector is always an inspector.”³⁶

The same sarcastic style could be found in the letters reporting the incorrect use of the *derecho de amparo*. For example, on December 15th, the newspaper *El Redondel* dedicated a brief editorial to criticize the Supreme Court because it allowed the exhibition of “heinously” immoral movies. “We think” the editorial stated, that the court should persecute more important objectives and not protect the “foreign exploiters” who made fortunes in Mexico by any means. It also advised all the people who were victims of different moral campaigns during the decade (“indecent magazine editors,” owners of low-class cabarets or “dealers of white female slaves”): “you know that [...] in the *derecho de amparo* is the solution to all your problems.”³⁷ Surely that day doctor Sergio Varela, after reading the article, decided that it depicted his thoughts on the exhibition of some movies he described as “a social problem worthy of correction.” In a letter written to the president on December 16th, Varela attached the cutout of the editorial and complained of both the legislative system and the way

³⁵ AGN, “A la hora cero del día de ayer” (1940) Fondo: Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas (186)/Caja: 0668, Expediente: 525.3 (1). [“la ciudad triste y desconfiada, quedó un poco más triste y un mucho más desconfiada”/“el pródigo Gobierno”/“la más moral, la más pura y la más casta del mundo [...] por decreto [aún sabiendo] la eficacia que tienen esos decretos”]

³⁶ Ibid. [“un cuerpo de caballerosos, atentos inspectores de [...] modales exquisitos y resuelta vocación apostólica” /“con o sin uniforme” /“mujeres honradas” /“por muy apostólico que sea, un inspector es siempre un inspector”]

³⁷ AGN, “Carta del doctor Sergio Varela al Presidente” (1940) Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho [187]/Caja: 381 A. On the moral panic associated with comics during that period: Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, & Other Threats to the Nation. A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). [“atrozmente” inmorales/“Nosotros creemos” /“explotadores extranjeros” /“editores de revistas procaces”/“tratantes de blancas”/“ya lo saben [...] en el amparo está el remedio de todos sus males”]

institutions such as the supreme court worked: “Sir, this situation has caused us, Mexicans, the loss of our faith in Justice.” The overuse of petitions for injunction “one of the victories of legislation” had been transformed into a way to confuse freedom with licentiousness.³⁸

Probably there was no more libertine atmosphere, in the eyes of public opinion, than the one of prostitution. When people inside the houses, *accessorias*, and brothels became involved in requesting and obtaining the *derecho de amparo*, suspicion and criticism were immediate. According to *El Universal*, the chief of police had complained about the difficult task of fighting against “immorality” [la inmoralidad] embodied in bars and brothels, because most of these places were protected by politicians. Besides, the judges granting legal protection to the owners of such places had a conflict of interest in the process, since some of the owners were officials from federal justice and the district department.³⁹

For their part, judges argued that they were “practically incapacitated” [prácticamente incapacitados] to rule against vice and prostitution because of the lack of cooperation from local authorities. Some of them stated that, when a closure of these places was ordered, as expected, appeals were made for their *derecho de amparo*. As part of the process it is necessary that the judge ask the complainant (in this case, the authorities) the reason for the closure. However, there were times in which officials either stated that they had no intention to bring any legal action or, simply, failed to confirm the charges against brothel owners, so for the judges, the accusation and the *derecho de amparo* became a vicious cycle.⁴⁰

Within this cycle there were also lawyers who asked the owners of prostitution places for a monthly fee to cover the necessary paperwork required to keep their business running.⁴¹ Madames

³⁸ Ibid. [esta situación ha hecho, señor [...] que los mexicanos perdamos la fe en la Justicia]/la “prostitución del amparo [...] una de las grandes conquistas de la legislación”]

³⁹ Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada de la Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (hereafter BMLT), Sección *Recortes*, “Amor al Menudeo,” *El Universal*, October 19, 1940.

⁴⁰ “Prostitución y juego seguirán dando quehacer,” *La Prensa*, December 27, 1940, pp. 4, 16.

⁴¹ “Intensa Batida de la Procuraduría contra las ‘Horizontales’ y ‘Masajistas’ Clandestinas,” *La Prensa*, December 14, 1940,

used their friendships with lawyers, judges and corrupt politicians, and asked their workers to plead for protection. Since the crime was living off prostitution earnings and not prostitution itself, some women managed to obtain provisional suspension of the closure of their places of employment by arguing that they did not hide their activity behind the law, and that they felt more protected under the regulatory system, because indoors they were less exposed to venereal diseases.⁴² There were other cases where closure was impossible because the places were presented as guesthouses and the workers as tenants renting “modest rooms” for personal use, circumventing the power of the authorities.⁴³

In this context bribery played an important role. Commonly called “gratification” [gratificación] or *mordida*, the money given to low-level officers to accelerate paperwork, forgive a fault and to simulate that no law has been broken, has been a very common practice in Mexican public administration for a long time. In the 1940s it was a tolerated sin, and although it was criticized, it was considered a natural consequence of the problems in the life of public employees.⁴⁴ Madames, probably used to paying such fees to health inspectors for decades, fell into the same practices when police tried to close their places, although the bribes did not always succeed. Sometimes authorities rejected the bribe, perhaps because they wanted to keep a good public image while performing closures of very important brothels, as when the sub-chief of judicial police himself attended a house-closing on Zarco street. There, according to the chief, one of the managers offered him one hundred and twenty two pesos to “not do anything” and promised that she could give him even more.⁴⁵ The officer took the cash, arrested everyone in the place, and handed the money to the head of the investigation department of the attorney [*Jefe del Departamento de Investigaciones de la*

pp. 4, 16.

⁴² “Lluvia de amparos de hoteles y casas de huéspedes,” *La Prensa*, April 17, 1940, p.20.

⁴³ “Los Lupanares Funcionan de Forma Legal,” *La Prensa*, October 4, pp. 4, 16. [cuartos discretos]

⁴⁴ Sara Minerva Luna Elizarrarás, “Corrupción, Legitimidad y Género en el México del ‘Milagro’: Discursos Públicos en torno a la Figura del Presidente Adolfo Ruíz Cortines” (M.A. Thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2012), 17.

⁴⁵ “Otros lenocinios ya fueron clausurados,” *La Prensa*, December 27, 1940, pp. 4 y 22. [para que no hiciera nada]

Procuraduría]. The money offered likely impressed readers of the newspapers that reported the closure, considering that the minimum wage was two Mexican pesos and fifty cents per day.⁴⁶ Some days before that, in an operation carried out by the same officials, three luxurious houses of prostitution were closed in Roma neighborhood, one of which was the famous brothel of Graciela Olmos, aka *La Bandida*. During the operation, there were pleadings, threats, and bribes, but “the agents were inflexible and took the very scented group of women to the police station.” The press also documented these events, with the second one appearing on the front page.⁴⁷

Despite the spreading of the news, sometimes brothels kept operating thanks to the *amparo*, while owners and managers came and went from police stations thanks to the payment of bail. At the same time, corruption among agents of the health department and police officers directly connected with prostitution was a constant source of complaints from different sectors of society, including women involved in the sex trade. The extinction of the zone of tolerance—a process which lasted around two years, from 1938 to 1940— together with the end of regulated prostitution, caused confusion and annoyance. This was used by officers of both agencies to extort women who were working on the streets as a result of the closure of 250 accessories in the *zona roja* at the center of the city. Even though the prostitutes had warned the chief of the maneuver, officer Miguel Orrico, that if the zone of tolerance was closed, they would have no other choice but to invade the main streets, hotels, cabarets, and any other place where they could survive, the authorities nevertheless closed the zone of Cuautemotzín, where lower-class prostitutes worked under the French System.⁴⁸

The strongest rationale the authorities presented—as explained in chapter 2— was concern for public well-being. The city’s growth by the end of the 1930s created a need to expropriate the

⁴⁶ Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, *Estadísticas históricas de México, 2009* (México: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2009), Table 6.2.

⁴⁷ “Clausura de Varios Centros de Vicio,” *El Universal*, December 23, 1940, pp. 1, 7. [pero los agentes se mostraron inexorables y cargaron con el perfumado cargamento femenino a las oficinas de la Policía Judicial]

⁴⁸ Katherine E. Bliss, *Compromised Positions...*, 200-2.

streets from the arms of sexual commerce in order to build new avenues, or to construct businesses and houses to match the city's *decorum* (See Map 1, p.110). Immediately after the official ban on sexual commerce in Cuauhtemotzín and neighboring streets, evicted sex workers organized to demand the revocation of the measure. The women affected requested injunctions, staged protests, sent at least one letter to the press explaining their position, and also set up a commission to discuss the new provisions with the Head of the Public Health Department

The letter, published in a city newspaper in March, 1939, related that up to 1,500 women had been evicted from their houses and workplaces after an operation involving 150 police agents.⁴⁹ The two central arguments of the letter were questioning the legality of the authorities' action, and highlighting the women's role as workers and economic support for their families. On this date prostitution was still an activity regulated by the state (although that was about to stop), so sex workers sought protection, requesting an injunction from the Supreme Court of Justice. The one-piece rooms where they worked were located in a zone that had been previously authorized by public officials for prostitution. In their letter, these women maintained they had known about the authorities' intentions to remove the tolerance zone "for a long time." They requested the injunction with the objective of guaranteeing their "legitimate rights to life", since they were being expelled without having been assigned to a new zone where they could continue working. They were all registered with the Health Inspection Office, authorized to work, and subject to paying taxes, and they asked this to be taken into account. Therefore, the eviction was contravening the legal provisions under which they had been working for decades:

Behind us are several thousands of families, elderly fathers, children, etc. who are, one way or another, sustained by our work [that has been] legalized by [...the] Health Department [...] if [another] tolerance zone had been appointed beforehand, and we hadn't obeyed our moving there, a rigorous measure would be acceptable, as the one that has been taken, but this way that only causes social evil with no benefit at all.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Sección Recortes, "Solamente se Pide Justicia al Señor Dr. Leonides Andreu Almazán por la Clausura de la Zona de Tolerancia," May, 19, 1939, no page number.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

The same day the letter was published by the press, a large group of women stood on the courtyard of the Health Department building “carrying an enormous banner that read ‘Where do we go?’”⁵¹ Among the protesters, a commission was formed which tried to talk with the Head of the Public Health Department. Since the official was dealing with “urgent issues,” the General Secretary of the department received the commission instead, and the sex workers stated their disagreements to him and asked for the revocation of the measure that aimed at their expulsion. The petition was rejected under the argument that the tolerance zone was adjacent to housing and commercial zones that were “very central [...] which undoubtedly caused detriment to the city’s decorum.”⁵² Instead of designating a new space where they could work, as the women requested in their letter, the secretary informed them what streets they could not work in, which included all the city center area. As has been explained in chapter 2, several months later, in April, 1940, authorities suggested that the sex workers moved to the northeast boundaries of the city, to San Bartolo Naucalpan. The proposal did not succeed due to the lack of basic public services there, and because of the remoteness from urban life as well as clients.

That was not the only battle the old red-light district sex workers lost. As the resolution forbidding prostitution in the city center was based on collective well-being, the women’s petition to the Supreme Court of Justice for injunction was rejected. The court considered the government’s measures as not causing “irreparable damage or grievances to the complainants,” since it did not prevent sexual commerce, but only restricted it to within certain boundaries.⁵³ Nonetheless, the prostitutes resisted the ordinance, and a few weeks later the women returned to the *accesorias* where they used to work, breaking the closure seals on the doors. Although they showed some injunction

⁵¹ Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Sección Recortes, “El Problema de las Mujeres Galantes Quedó Resuelto en el Depto. de Salubridad, Ayer,” *El Nacional*, May, 20, 1939, no page number.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ “Cuauhtemotzín No Será Foco de Inmoralidades. La Corte Niega Un Amparo,” *Excelsior*, March, 18, 1939.

orders to policemen, several women were arrested for “breaking the seals.”⁵⁴ Some lawyers and judges surely profited from arranging documents that contravened the Supreme Court’s resolution, but which, in the end, were of little use to the prostitutes. A few months later, the *accesorias* were demolished; however, sexual commerce in the city center did not disappear. Dance halls, cabarets and hotels became the new scenarios for prostitution, causing complaints from neighbors and families, accusing sex workers of invading spaces where “[good children] and decent people abounded,” although it was the growth of the city that had invaded the tolerance zone.⁵⁵

In spite of the fact that prostitution was not prohibited by law, the increase in the number of street solicitors was regarded as “an attack on public moral(s).” On the one hand, press and neighbors complained not only about the visibility of these women but also about the methods they used to attract the attention of their prospective customers. On the other hand, people were annoyed at the fact that it was evident that prostitutes aimed to pass for “decent” women [mujeres decentes], housewives or workers on the way to their offices or homes. The press started to inform about the exploitation these women suffered in the hands of their pimps and the police officers, who started to ask for fees from these women to pass through certain areas of the city.⁵⁶ Prostitutes organized themselves and reported the maltreatment they received from the officers, who took them to stations to charge them fines (the women did not get receipts) some of which became so large, given the frequency of arrests, that they could not be paid.⁵⁷

General Manuel Núñez Muratalla, chief of Mexico City police, admitted during an interview that “part of the accusations were true,” and agreed to meet with a group of women who advised that “their daily problem [was] increasingly more severe because in the streets they suffer inclement

⁵⁴ Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Sección Recortes, “Asalto del ‘Escuadrón Galante,’” *El Universal*, June 28, 1940, no page number.

⁵⁵ “Están Regresando las Mujeres a Sus Accesorias Ya,” *El Nacional*, May 30, 1939, p. 8.

⁵⁶ “El Departamento de Sanidad Impide que la Policía Desarrolle una Labor de Profilaxis,” *La Prensa*, February 16, 1940, pp. 4, 21. [un ataque a la moralidad pública]

⁵⁷ AGN, “La Suscrita en Unión de Varias Compañeras que nos Buscamos la Vida,” Fondo: Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas, Expediente: 525.3/001.

weather and their economic situation is getting worse because the lack of control over all the women doing the same job.”⁵⁸ This “lack of control” directly refers to the laws regulating prostitution passed months before. With no place to work and no legal assistance, women working on the streets had to pay more than one bribe for both police and borough workers, per night. General Núñez Murtalla assured them he understood their situation, so he had ordered to bring the “razzias”[raids] to an end and to stop the police department from persecuting the women selling their bodies in the streets. He asked them to report those officers performing arrests on their own and clarified that the health department was the only office authorized to delimitate a zone of tolerance, so the police department had no say in it.⁵⁹

However, the problem was far from being solved and the complaints continued. “Honest families” kept on protesting because prostitutes would walk along the streets at any time “showing off their impunity” under the protection of the police. According to the newspaper *La Prensa*, people who were annoyed by the behavior and presence of prostitutes in the streets wondered if that was the price that had to be paid in order to get the houses of prostitution closed down. The author of the column *Vox Populi* questioned: “Should it be possible that the police headquarters or the health department ban these outdoor meetings of women without shame and scruple?”⁶⁰ Just a few weeks before, that same daily paper had published information about Núñez Murtalla’s meeting with the twelve prostitutes: “These unfortunate heterae have no idea what to do to get away from giving so many bribes.”⁶¹ Both examples illustrate, with opposing adjectives and approaches, the confusions and different opinions caused by the new sex trade conditions in Mexico City. The lack of a well-

⁵⁸ “La Cuestión de la Tolerancia en México,” *El Nacional*, February 16, 1940, *Segunda Sección*, p 1. [“parte de lo dicho era verdad”/“su problema diario [era] cada vez más grave ya que en la calle sufren las inclemencias del tiempo y cada vez más se acentúa su difícil situación económica por la falta de un control absoluto en todas las que ejerc[ía]n su oficio”]

⁵⁹ Ibid.; “Las Vendedoras de Amor No Serán Perseguidas por las Autoridades,” *La Prensa*, February 17th, 1940, pp. 4, 24.

⁶⁰ “Vox Populi: Las Damiselas han Asentado sus Reales en Santa Veracruz y San Juan de Letrán,” *La Prensa*, April 17, 1940, p.11. [“familias honestas”/“haciendo alarde de impunidad”/ “¿No será posible que la Jefatura de Policía o el Departamento de Sanidad prohíban esas reuniones a la intemperie, de mujerzuelas sin pudor y sin escrúpulos?”]

⁶¹ “Las Vendedoras de Amor No Serán Perseguidas por las Autoridades,” *La Prensa*, February 17, 1940, p. 4. [Las desdichadas hetairas no saben qué hacer para evitarse tantas mordidas]

defined tolerance zone dispersed street sexual commerce and intensified corruption. Women dedicated to commercial sex wanted to continue working in the places that were familiar to them, and police found a constant source of income charging fees or extorting money from sex workers as an alternative to taking them to the police station. Brothel closures and collective arrests increased considerably in 1940, and the methods utilized by them—injunction petitions and bribes—seemed insufficient to contain the authorities' action. In this context, the madames from the Roma neighborhood used their economic resources as well as their political contacts to promote more aggressive strategies framed by revolutionary discourse. The search for labor recognition within a trade union caught great attention from the newspapers, particularly due to the political corruption that pervaded the story.

The Madames' Affair

New Year's Eve in 1941 was more a reason to worry than a celebration for many women dedicated to the sex trade in Mexico City. During the first months of the new year, regulations banned the administration, possession, and maintenance of houses or places holding prostitution. As a consequence, the chief of Mexico City's attorney general [*Jefe del Departamento de la Procuraduría General de Justicia del Distrito Federal*] ordered the detention of owners, administrators and/or managers. The agents performed raids in brothels, *casas de citas*, assignation houses and *accesorias*, and placed seals shutting down the entrance as madames and their helpers were taken to police stations. Prostitutes were also taken in order to strengthen the accusations against the *matronas*. In some occasions even customers ended up in the stations declaring their innocence in front of the judge.

Over and over again the agents passed themselves off as customers of the places they should verify. In their reports they included the negotiations they conducted with the workers or managers, to whom they asked the price for their services, and the name of the person in charge. They also assured they had seen couples having sexual relationships. As explained in chapter two, everything

served as evidence: the furniture, alcoholic drinks, musical instruments and the arrangement inside the house were useful to build the case. Authorities seemed determined to take any action against brothels, which became more severe as months went by, making the owners increasingly worried: while in 1939 only two people were arrested for pimping, in 1940, there were 37, 30 of which were arrested between September and December.⁶²

Matronas and their workers kept complaining about extortions. It is highly probable that in the past they had gotten used to giving money to low-level officers. On the other hand, the owners of important brothels had the protection of politicians, members of the military and important officials, protection they obtained in exchange for some economic and personal favors. In other words, they knew well how corruption in the system worked and they adapted to it. During some decades madames were part of this system and had the legal responsibility for the women they represented, in such a way that, even within the contexts outside the law, they were in charge of the negotiations on behalf of their workers. Nevertheless, from the moment the sites to exercise prostitution were prohibited, not only did the arrests, raids and closures increase, but also the money spent on bails, fines or bribes to keep such businesses running, which was not a very productive situation for the madames, especially because the state did not seem to be willing to re-adopt the French system.

In order to comprehend this game of social adjustment after the revolution, it is useful to remember that the connections between the people and the state are not unchangeable facts; on the contrary, they are relations that are being negotiated continuously. As for prostitution, the state did its job “shaping a public opinion with the aid of rigid systems of discipline and exclusion,”⁶³ being stricter about the application of the law against *lenocinio* in the capital, and leaving out by decree those people who dealt with the administration of the sex trade. The ones affected, mostly women, did what they could to become part of the nation that then excluded them.

⁶² AHDF, Fondo: Penitenciaría, Sección: Cárceles, Expedientes de reos, delito: lenocinio (1934-1952)

⁶³ Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, XIII.

At this juncture, the madames used all the resources they had known during the period when prostitution was regulated, but when these became insufficient they proposed new rights and obligations according to the context. For example, in June 1941, in a document entitled “Commitment Taken on by the Registered Owners of Houses of Assignment before the State” [*Compromiso que ante el Estado contraen las suscritas dueñas de casas de asignación*], nine signers sought the support of the president to build “a special hospital for the treatment of those ill women selling their bodies.” In the proposal, they agreed to run the hospital, staff and medicines with their own resources. In exchange they requested to have control and direct supervision from the government, “but without taking our own control and vigilance away, so as to avoid, as much as possible, the inhuman treatment and abuse such women had suffered.”⁶⁴ As explain in chapter 2, the abuse that the *matronas* referred to was in Hospital Morelos, which had been part of the regulatory system from the nineteenth century on, and a cause of fear among sex workers in Mexico City for decades, due to the fact that they were forced to stay there for several weeks when they were diagnosed with a venereal disease in the required medical check-ups.

Aware of the government’s new strategy to save and rehabilitate prostitutes, madames picked up on the measures that the government had implemented inside the Morelos Hospital years before.⁶⁵ The madames proposed that within the hospital there would be workshops and schools, also financed by them, with the only condition that access should be limited to those women working in their brothels, “since it would be humanly impossible to take care of all the women working beyond our control.” At the same time, they argued that if they were working outside the law, it was because their needs had exceeded their desire to obey the prohibition of the government: “we are women who, due to our misfortune, did not and do not have any other way to earn a living

⁶⁴ AGN, “Compromiso que Ante el Estado Contraen las Suscritas Dueñas de Casas de Asignación” (1941), Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho [187], Caja: 381 A. [“un hospital especial para el tratamiento de las enfermedades de todas las mujeres que comercian con su cuerpo”/“pero sin que se nos elimine a nosotras del mismo control y vigilancia, con objeto de evitar en lo posible los tratos inhumanos y vejaciones a que antes habían sido sujetas dichas mujeres”]

⁶⁵ Such measures are explained in detail in chapter 2.

and get food for our family, who depend on what we earn, as well as [on what] others [earn] [...] since there are at least twenty people living in our houses besides our relatives; (this is the) reason why we keep breaking the law and bearing the abuse and immoralities [...] coming from certain officers.”⁶⁶

Thus, they presented themselves as providers, in domestic and public fields: responsible not only for their own family, but for many other families that depended on their business, and therefore extortion was an unfair consequence of their sacrifice. At the same time, they let the government know that they knew the political changes concerning prostitution, but, when presenting themselves as the support for several families, including their own, they avoided the title of “exploiters” (which was a key point when defining the crime of *lenocinio*). By avoiding being criminalized, they avoided exile from the state. For that reason, they asked the government, over and over again, for supervision of their work inside the Hospital. Cooperation and control were the key elements of this proposal:

It would be desirable, that if [...] this offer to cooperate [...] with the state is to be accepted, we were informed so that we can intensify our labor in order to make it more effective, not only to comply with our offer to the state to have control and surveillance over us, but also as a way to demonstrate the state that our acts, instead of being harmful as they have been considered so far, we will fight so that they are taken as something good and effective, since the idea about us is that we are exploiters, but we will demonstrate the contrary, trying, by any means, to regenerate women, with the help and supervision of the state.⁶⁷

As long as the state invigilated the *matronas* and they in turn supervised their workers, the cooperation of those involved could be of benefit to public health. Reading between the lines of this

⁶⁶ AGN, “Compromiso que Ante el Estado Contraen las Suscritas Dueñas de Casas de Asignación” (1941), Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho [187], Caja: 381 A. [“ya que sería humanamente imposible atender a todas las que deambulan fuera de nuestro control”/“somos mujeres que por nuestra desgracia no tuvimos ni tenemos otro medio de ganarnos el pan de nuestros familiares, que a nuestras expensas subsisten, así como [de los] demás [...] ya que en nuestra casa habitan por lo menos veinte personas sin contar los familiares; motivo por el cual nos hemos visto precisadas a venir transgrediendo la Ley y por lo mismo soportando toda clase de vejaciones e inmoralidades [...] de parte de determinados elementos oficiales”]

⁶⁷ Sería de desear que si [...] este ofrecimiento de cooperación [...] con el Estado es de aceptársenos, se nos hiciera saber a fin de intensificar nuestra labor a fin de hacerla más efectiva tanto para poder solventar nuestro ofrecimiento cuanto, por y para que el Estado llegue a tener sobre nosotras un absoluto control y vigilancia y para que el mismo Estado se convenza de que en lugar de ser nociva nuestra actuación como hasta hoy se ha considerado, pugnaremos porque sea benéfica y efectiva, ya que se tiene la idea de que somos explotadoras de la mujer en general, pero que pugnaremos por demostrar lo contrario tratando por todos los medios a nuestro alcance de la regeneración de las mismas, con ayuda y vigilancia del Estado

document it could be understood that these women were willing to spend more money than was given to the government in the regulatory system, and that they would even consider giving those women who worked in the sex trade the means to abandon such activity, as long as the madames kept being part of the national project. It could even be thought that a plan like this caused fewer expenses than the costly extortions that, for the past months, had gone out of control, not only for those women, but also for the state. Perhaps in an attempt to avoid bribes, sometimes *matronas* decided to change the dynamics of the sex trade: such was the case of María Luisa Rodríguez de Alva, who, for her defense, presented documents which proved that she had an agreement with some girls who rented rooms in which they could have sexual relations with “their friends,” who paid [for the service] directly to the worker.⁶⁸ By arguing that the income was for the rent and not a percentage of each sexual encounter, Rodríguez de Alva sought to avoid punishment, but she did not get a favorable response from the authorities, just like her colleagues with regard to the hospital project.

In an effort to be part of the modern revolutionary state, madames defended themselves with the elements they knew from the legal system which they had learned to use for decades, but when this stopped working, they tried to use the same resources used by other groups (such as workers and peasants) that had already been accepted by the new state: corporativism and union rights. Before 1917, Mexican citizens had individual rights, but very few collective rights. The constitution as well as the following administrations changed this situation significantly: the objective of educational programs was to reach all those people living in forgotten places. The law gave peasants the right to property, and guaranteed specific rights for workers. Being a citizen under the revolutionary context meant having the protection of the government against some threats, which were often linked to “the foreign” [lo extranjero] in the debates of the constituent assembly

⁶⁸ AHDF, “Rodríguez de Alba Zapata María Luisa” (1944), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaria, *Expedientes de Reos*, Caja: 818, Expediente: 4901. [con “sus amigos”]

[*Asamblea Constituyente*]. However, it is important to note that the revolutionary state did not have the creation of citizens as its main objective: “instead, the goal was to create and to harness corporate groups and sectors into the state apparatus [...] the task of building up the state was more important than building up the citizen,” and for this, the harmonious coexistence of the popular classes under the protection of the revolutionary government was essential.⁶⁹

It is true that women did not obtain full citizenship rights until 1953, but this does not mean that they were completely excluded from the idea of nationhood, or that the most important legislation of the country did not consider the rights they could have, such as the right of association for political means, for petition, as well as the right to take up arms for the defense of the nation.⁷⁰ Although they could not participate in political decisions with their vote, their presence and collective action were important for the strengthening of the state, as long as they followed the guidelines established by the revolution. In this environment madames decided to form the Union for the Defense of Owners and Managers of Assignment Houses [UDPECA/*Union de Defensa de Propietarias y Encargadas de Casas de Asignación*] in November, 1949. Under the heading “Owners of *lenocinios* at war against bribery,” the newspaper *La Prensa* reported on the first meeting of the organization at the general secretariat at the brothel of Leonor Fuentes aka “la manca,” [the one-armed] on 168 Querétaro Street, in the Roma neighborhood (See Map 2, p.111). According to the newspaper, the organizers handed out citations in all the brothels of the zone so the ones interested went to the reunion, where they would discuss the collective action against the health inspector and the “so-called police officers” who used extortion against them every day.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, 73-4.

⁷⁰ Josefina Manjarréz Rosas, “Género, Mujeres y Ciudadanía en México, 1917-1953. Apuntes para Una Reflexión.” *Graffylia. Revista de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* 5 (2005): 61. A deep reflection upon this topic can be found in: Gabriela Cano, “Debates en torno al Sufragio y a la Ciudadanía de las Mujeres en México,” in *Historia de las Mujeres en España y en América Latina. Del Siglo XX a los umbrales del XXI*, coords. Guadalupe Gómez-Ferrer *et al.* (Madrid, Cátedra, 2006), 535-51.

⁷¹ “Las Propietarias de Lenocinios en Guerra contra las Mordidas,” *La Prensa*, November 19, 1940, p.19. [“Las propietarias de lenocinios en guerra contra las mordidas”/ “supuestos policías”]

Although some *matronas* decided not to get involved, the association had been created some weeks before, for which it received the support and sympathy of the Mexican Federation of Labor [*Federación Mexicana del Trabajo*], an important organization grouping different associations of workers and labor unions. In an interview, Roberto Blancarte, secretary general of the federation, stated that the owners of houses of assignation had partnered to “make both Chambers, Parliament and Senate, react in order to bring to an end the absurdity contained in Article 207 of the Criminal Code [...] in this movement many organizations are involved [...] knowing that with their moral support for the creation of a zone of tolerance, they make it a benefit to the community.”⁷² He also declared that the UDPECA did not have the character of a trade union because it had no chief to report to, although all the efforts would be addressed to legislators so they might allow the re-opening of brothels and *casas de citas* in Mexico City. To that end, declared Blancarte, a manifesto would be written to present the reasons the leaders of the Mexican Federation of Labor sought to re-establish the regulatory system. The document would get around at social and political centers, so everyone could be informed about it and show their support.⁷³

However, the raids continued and in the last week of 1940 the owners of clandestine brothels and luxurious *casas de citas* spent Christmas and New Year’s celebrations either in police stations or enjoying their freedom under bail. Perhaps some of them tried to prevent the surprise visits of the secret agents, while others celebrated with their powerful customers. No matter in which situation they were, maybe the only hope they shared was that the New Year would bring back times of regulated prostitution and leave behind their recent problems, which was far from reality. December 1st, 1940 was the beginning of the presidency of Manuel Ávila Camacho, the most drastic

⁷² “Ardua Persecución contra Mordelones de Lenocinios,” *La Prensa*, November 5, 1940, pp. 6, 19. [“para buscar que las Cámaras, tanto de Diputados como de Senadores, reaccionen, acabando con el absurdo que encierra el artículo 207 del Código de Procedimientos Penales [...] en este movimiento —agregó— toman parte numerosas organizaciones [...] conscientes de que con su apoyo moral para que se establezca una zona de tolerancia hacen positivo beneficio a la colectividad”]

⁷³ *Ibid.*

government (until then) with regard to the closure of centers of prostitution in the city. As part of his efforts to defend the nation, not only did he send 300 soldiers to fight in the name of Mexico on the Allies' side, but he also reinforced the measures to avoid venereal diseases in civil or military men, who would defend the country in case of attack. At certain points, such as Reynosa, the entrance of men to brothels and bars (especially if they were wearing the uniform) was banned; also the presidency asked for the support of officers in charge to prevent American soldiers from crossing the border looking for fun.⁷⁴

With every change within the regime, the pieces of the revolutionary political game were restructured by a series of bold moves in which the loyalty towards *el señor presidente* was a key factor. For example, Amador Coutiño expressed his respect to the president a few days after the latter took office through a letter in which he “beg[ged] in the most respectful way for the opportunity to be part of [his] administration, noticeable, from the very beginning, for [the] aim to consolidate every revolutionary goal, and which lead to the economic development so necessary for the nation.” Motivated by “[Coutiño’s] confidence [...] in the actions and friendship that I do not deserve,” he asked for a strategic position: minister of the supreme court of justice of the nation. Bearing that objective in mind, he attached his curriculum vitae, in which he highlighted his designation in 1938 as attorney general of Mexico City during the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas. Coutiño stated that he had left so as to “be a part of the political activities in the political campaign of Ávila Camacho.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ “Carta del General Miguel Flores Villar al Presidente” (1944), AGN, Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho [187]/Caja: 381 A; Miguel Flores Villar attached to his letter a newspaper cutout related to the U.S army and venereal disease in Mexico: “Reynosa Starts a Cleaning Up Drive,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, January 16, 1944. About the complexity of the border vice-tourism that emerged during the first decades of the twentieth century, see: Eric Michael Schantz, “All night at the Owl: The Social and Political Relations of Mexicali’s Red Light District, 1909-1925,” in *On the Border. Society and Culture between the United States and Mexico*, ed. Andrew Grant Wood (Lanham: Scholarly Sources, 2004), 91-143; Eric Michael Schantz, “Meretricious Mexicali. Exalted Masculinities and the Crafting of Male Desire in a Border Red-Light District, 1908-1925,” in *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*, ed. Víctor M. Macías Gonzalez and Anne Rubenstein (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 2012), 101-31.

⁷⁵ “Carta de Amador Coutiño a Manuel Ávila Camacho” (1940), AGN, Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho, [187]/Caja: 1034 (702.12/1-3 -- 702.12/4-41). [“roga[ba] de la manera más atenta y respetuosa formar parte de su administración que se destaca desde un principio, en el anhelo de consolidar todas las conquistas revolucionarias logradas y marca, al mismo tiempo, fuertes líneas que nos conducen al levantamiento económico general que tanto necesita el

With revolutionary style, he attached telegrams coming from different organizations which supported him and argued that his “true revolutionary background, his competence and honesty,” as well as his professionalism and his friendship with the president, made him the best candidate for the position.⁷⁶

Coutiño clearly stated his New Year’s resolution — and maybe made a toast to it in one of the luxurious brothels of Roma — without suspecting that his political aspirations would end as a result of his relations with the *matronas* of the UDPECA. Although it was certain that officials from all levels of government were involved in the business of prostitution, until then, there had been no direct accusation, and no mention of names. For Amador Coutiño and Roberto Blancarte the situation was about to change. Since October 1940, *La Prensa* had reported that the chief of the police department knew about the “senior officials disregarding their duties and mission,” collaborating with the *matronas* so they could prevent the prohibition of the brothels in the city. In his statement, General Núñez Murtalla said that they were carrying out the investigation so as to, at the perfect moment, “report the facts to whom it may concern.”⁷⁷

The year started with news about more raids. During the first week of January, the sub-chief of judicial police, José Castillo Canales, and ten other agents who were following the instruction given by the attorney general of the federal district and federal territories (Octavio Véjar Vázquez), closed a brothel property of María de la Torre Velázquez. According to the newspaper, she and her pupils locked themselves up inside a room, which is why the agents had to knock the door down in order to arrest them all. The customers, among whom were members of parliament, generals, and politicians, managed to escape. However, the sub-chief of police assured that he knew their names.

país”/“la confianza [...] en sus actos y la amistad que inmerecidamente me guarda”/“dedicarse a actividades políticas dentro del Ávila-Camachismo”]

⁷⁶ Telegrama de la Confederación Nacional de Veteranos de la Revolución, December 5, 1940; Telegrama de la Comisión Política del Sindicato de Empleados de la Procuraduría General de Justicia del Distrito Federal y Territorios Federales, December 7, 1940. Ibid. [“limpios antecedentes revolucionarios, competencia [y] honestidad”]

⁷⁷ “Lenocinio y Juego Serán Perseguidos,” *La Prensa*, October 5, 1940, pp. 4,17. [“altos funcionarios, desatendiéndose de sus deberes y alta misión encomendada”/ “hacerlo del conocimiento de quien corresponda”]

He also declared to the press that he had received a great deal of anonymous threats saying that if he did not get Maria de la Torre out of jail, they would ask the president to revoke his position. In his station he received important figures and lawyers who talked in favor of the madam, and who even assured that they would talk to the attorney themselves.⁷⁸

The problems between those politicians protecting brothels and those fighting for their closure reached their highest point two months later, when public opinion was informed that the creation of UDPECA had been Roberto Blancarte's idea and that Amador Coutiño had been receiving large amounts of money from the *matronas* so as not to be bothered by the agents of the Health and Police Departments.⁷⁹ Even though Coutiño defended himself immediately, sending letters to several newspapers stating that their political partners were slandering him, a few weeks later he was called to testify before a judge.⁸⁰ This issue was plastered all over the newspapers of the city, particularly in June, when apart from Coutiño, Alfonso Urdapilleta Castillo, Guillermo Blancarte, and seven or eight owners of assignation houses were under arrest. Among the owners was Josefina Peña Vera, secretary general of UDPECA arrested along with her "lover," [su amante] Roberto García Zendejas, "general advisor" [asesor general] of the union.⁸¹

As stated in the articles, the sub-chief of judicial police, Castillo Canales, had followed Véjar Vázquez's orders to investigate the fraud committed on the owners of houses of prostitution, who had been paying regularly, since the change in the Criminal Code, to some people ostensibly to revoke Article 207 which criminalized their profession. According to Josefina Peña Vera's statement, a man simply identified as "Garza" came to her after the first closures, saying he was a very

⁷⁸ "Los Tratantes de Blancas Cuentan con la Ayuda de Personajes Influyentes," *La Prensa*, January 6, 1941.

⁷⁹ "Ex Procurador de Justicia Convertido en Protector de las Casas de Lenocinio," *La Prensa*, March 21, 1941, pp. 2,6.

⁸⁰ "Se Defiende de los Cargos Que le Han Hecho el Señor Lic. Don Amador Coutiño," *Excelsior*, March 21, 1941, *Segunda Sección*, p. 1; "El Licenciado Coutiño Rechaza Calumniosas Especies," *El Universal*, March 21, 1941, pp. 1, 8.

⁸¹ "Ex Procurador de Justicia Preso," *Excelsior*, July 13, 1941, pp. 1,8; "El Ex Procurador del DF. Lic. Coutiño, Detenido," *Novedades*, July 13, 1941, p.1, *Segunda Sección*; "El Ex Procurador Coutiño, Preso por Asociación Delictuosa Ayer, Acusado de Burlar la Confianza de las Lenonas a Quienes Hizo Promesas de Inmunidad Absoluta," *La Prensa*, July 13, 1941, pp. 2, 27. The other madames arrested were: Amalia Barajas Gutiérrez (or Montiel), Guadalupe Ortiz Sánchez, Luz Aguirre, Dora Jiménez, Elba del Bosque Ríos, María de la Torre and Fanny Córdova.

important senator. He told Peña to ask for 150 pesos from all the *matronas* every month, so as to collect 150,000 pesos that Garza promised would go to parliament in order to bring back the pre-1940 law. The fee was given monthly but the closures kept occurring. In a meeting, General Núñez, then chief of police, told Peña Vera and their partners that Garza was not a senator but a “criminal.”⁸² The arrest of the so-called senator coincided with the administrative change and the reinforcement of the campaign against houses of prostitution, so madames went to Blancarte to ask for protection (which they needed more than ever). It was then that the secretary of the Mexican Federation of Labor suggested that they create a line of defense for the owners and managers of the houses.⁸³

Because of a disagreement with Blancarte that was not clarified, the *matronas* decided to hire Salvador Urdapilleta, who, for 150 pesos a month, negotiated all the necessary injunction petitions. During the interrogations Peña Vera said that her lover was the one who had advised her to look for a cheaper lawyer. When Coutiño “coldly” received them and agreed to charge a hundred pesos for his services per month, the *matronas* decided to accept the deal and substitute Urdapilleta. Coutiño negotiated *amparos* for 72 hours, which allowed madames to work during weekends under the argument that brothels could not be closed if there was not any legal document asking them to do so. Due to the fact that the pressure and extortion from the police and inspectors worsened, UDPECA’s members brought their case to Coutiño, who asked for 500 pesos from each of them in exchange for solving their situation. This is how he collected around 11,000 pesos (meaning that almost 20 owners and managers paid the required fee), which Coutiño received from Roberto García Zendejas, but without giving any receipt. When testifying in front of *el Procurador Véjar Vázquez*,

⁸² “Aparecen Nuevos Personajes en el Sonado ‘Affaire’ de las Lenonas,” *La Prensa*, July 15, 1941, pp. 4, 11. [“muy influyente”/“un bandido”]

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Coutiño tried to defend himself, arguing that he had received the money for his services (and not as bribes) because he was an “important and expensive” lawyer.⁸⁴

As a result of the statements and investigations related to the case, public prosecutor [Ministerio Público] Juan José Covarrubias asked the judge (Gilberto Suárez Arvizu), to proceed against Coutiño, Urdapilleta, Blancarte and some *matronas*. Based on the arguments that the UDPECA had been formed just after the dismantling of regulated prostitution and that the fees the officials had earned were products of prostitution, all the people involved were charged with crime association and *lenocinio*. From that moment on, all the news focused on Coutiño and Blancarte, who seemed unable to escape from the accusations against them. Coutiño immediately used all the resources he knew for his own defense, and wrote a letter to Manuel Ávila Camacho on July 12th, 1941, asking for a change of judge in his case, because Covarrubias was “a well-known personal enemy” who had appointed Suárez Arvizu “to aggravate the accusations and look for more charges.” Six days later, Coutiño received a letter from the president’s private secretary [*Secretario Particular*], in which he said that it was impossible to give a positive answer to his request, but that he had instructed Véjar Vázquez (whom Coutiño had accused of “being his enemy”) to act “as legally as possible.”⁸⁵ In other words, the president would not support him.

In an effort to regain his status, Coutiño looked for political support in his homeland. Students, workers, and peasants from Chiapas sent messages to the president protesting against the “ploy” and the “political intrigue” the ex-official was enduring. There were two relevant telegrams: one sent by a group of twenty women (“as women that supported [him] during the electoral campaign”) demanding that Ávila Camacho should intercede directly in the newspaper scandal which

⁸⁴ “Va Resultando Positivamente Escandaloso el ‘caso’ de los Llamados ‘Nidos de Amor,’” *El Universal*, July 15, 1941, p.1, *Segunda Sección*; “Ex Procurador de Justicia Convertido en Protector de las Casas de Lenocinio,” *La Prensa*, March 21, 1941, pp. 2,6. [“fríamente”/ “influyente y caro”]

⁸⁵ AGN, “Telegramas y Cartas Relacionadas con Amador Coutiño” (1941), Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho, Caja: 0455 (444.1/93-444.1/188). [“enemigo personal [...] como les consta a todos en la Procuraduría”/“para que se enseñe en la acusación y trate de buscarme toda clase de daños”/“una enemistad gratuita”/“con el más estricto apego a la ley”]

only aimed at “nullifying” the “revolutionary actions” performed by Coutiño. The other telegram was from his wife, María Teresa L. De Coutiño, asking to put an end to the injustice her husband was suffering because he had not committed the “infamous crime” of pimping, and arguing that those accusations had the objective of “tarnishing his professional reputation and the honor of our family.”⁸⁶ It is interesting how Coutiño used petitions signed by women, such as his wife, perhaps in a desperate attempt to separate from the *matronas*, who had always been criticized for their immorality. Newspapers informed that María Teresa L. de Coutiño, and not her lawyers, had asked for an *amparo* for her husband, arguing that he was not guilty and that the apprehension order should not proceed. This is how Coutiño used his wife’s voice not only to bolster his own honor and credibility, but also to reiterate the accusations against his political enemies.⁸⁷

Roberto Blancarte also argued that the charges against him were “some kind of plot to make him the ‘scapegoat,’”⁸⁸ however, at the interrogation several documents were presented before him. One was on UDPECA letterhead in which Blancarte appeared as legal advisor, and the other was a letter from the Mexican Federation of Workers congratulating Josefina Peña Vera for “having organized [such an] important proletariat collective” (a copy of this letter had been previously distributed to numerous organizations and authorities). Besides, during a confrontation between Peña Vera and Blancarte, the latter admitted to having been at meetings with the *matronas* at least once, but denied having authorized the use of his name in the letterheads. The general secretariat of UDPECA claimed that Blancarte had given them his permission as well as his advice in the meetings with the *matronas*.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ibid. [“maniobras”/“intrigas políticas”/“víctima”/“como partidarias [de] usted en [la] campaña electoral”/“nulificar”/“acción revolucionaria”/“infamante delito”/“manchar su reputación profesional y la honorabilidad de nuestra familia”]

⁸⁷ “Aparecen Nuevos Personajes en el Sonado ‘Affaire’ de las Lenonas,” *La Prensa*, July 15, 1941, pp. 4, 11, 21; “La Inmoralidad del Lic. Coutiño,” *Novedades*, July 15, 1941, pp. 1, 8.

⁸⁸ “Graves Revelaciones en el Asunto Relacionado con las Inmoralidades en las Casas de Lenocinio,” *La Prensa*, July 17, 1941. [maquinaciones desconocidas que lo señalaban a él para ser el ‘chivo expiatorio’]

⁸⁹ “El ‘Caso’ de las Lenonas,” *El Universal*, July 17, 1941, pp. 1, 8; “El Lic. Coutiño Obró como Defensor que tiene Derecho a Defender a los Reos,” *La Prensa*, July 18, 1941. [por haberse organizado en importante núcleo proletario]



Figure 12. Amador Coutiño accompanied by his lawyers and some friends after appearing in front of the judge. *La Prensa*, July 15, 1941.



Figure 13. Roberto Blancarte behind the court bars declaring about the madames' affair during trial. *La Prensa*, July 15, 1941.



Figure 14. Several madames cited to attend court: Dora Jiménez y Leonor de la Torre (left), Josefina Peña Vera and the judge Gilberto Suárez Arvizu (center), Amalia Barajas Bautista and María de la Torre (right). *Excelsior*, July 15, 1941

Coutiño and the others accused could continue their processes after paying bail of around 500 pesos. In February 1943, authorities attempted to detain Alfonso Urdapilleta, Roberto García, Josefina Peña Vera and the other madames involved. The detention duration was from seven to ten months in jail, depending on the case. All of them appealed, however, the documents do not show if they served jail time or if the appeal was successful.⁹⁰ Coutiño was acquitted at the beginning of 1942, but the accusations damaged his political aspirations. He immediately wrote letters to the president with newspaper articles attached, in which important lawyers showed their support for his innocence, and he asked, again, for a job inside the government, since his “last battle in politics” had led him to spend his resources and to incur debts.⁹¹ Although he had a meeting with the personal assistant to

⁹⁰ AHDF, “Roberto García Zendejas, Alfonso Urdapilleta Castillo, Fany Córdoba Vera, Josefina Peña Vera, Dora Jiménez Arriguñaca, Amalia Baraja Gutiérrez o Bautista, María de la Torre Velázquez” (1941), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección: Penitenciaría, expedientes de reos, Caja: 599, Expedientes: 5534-5540.

⁹¹ AGN, “Telegramas y Cartas Relacionadas con Amador Coutiño” (1941), Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho, Caja: 0455 (444.1/93-444.1/188). [“última contienda política”]

the president, his name did not appear in the list of magistrates section of the Federal Tax Court [Tribunal Fiscal de la Federación] from 1943.⁹²

The scandal not only meant the discrediting of the officials involved, but also the state's denial to integrate madames into the new national project. At least in Mexico City their activities would be prohibited, therefore they could not negotiate their rights and duties as other groups did. In fact, one of the issues of the "madames' famous affair" was the protection granted to brothels. During an interview, a judge declared that it would not be so easy for madames to get protection through *amparos* from that moment on, and claimed they should pay a fee of five thousand pesos if they wanted to obtain injunction for their brothels.⁹³ As a consequence, houses of prostitution transformed from what they were. They turned into clandestine places which brought important changes to the buying and selling process of the sex business. Prostitution on the streets, in bars, and in cabarets increased significantly and the police continued with raids, extortion and closures. Only few of the most skilled *matronas* figured out how to use corruption to their own benefit, and could keep their places running. Nonetheless, the access to those exclusive brothels would be limited.

Conclusions

When Salvador Novo wrote the essay that started this chapter, the most famous madam of Mexico City's modern history had been dead for about ten years. The doors to the legendary house of *La Bandida* closed when she died, just as did stories like those Novo longingly evokes. Most of the *matronas* of the city, those "anachronistic members" [miembros anacrónicos] of the revolutionary state, did not possess the freedom to operate brothels like the few women able to ally with powerful men. Things developed at their own pace in other states of the republic, resulting in very peculiar cases, such as that of *Las Poquianchis*: four women, owners of several brothels in Guanajuato and

⁹² AGN, "Designación de Magistrados para el Tribunal Superior de la Federación" (1942), Fondo: Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho, Caja: 1041, Expediente: 702.12/75.

⁹³ "Amador Coutiño Declaró Bien Preso," *La Prensa*, July 19, 1941, pp. 2, 12. [El Sonado Affaire de las Lenonas] is the way the newspaper *La Prensa*, called this scandal in July 15, 1941.

Jalisco, who killed at least 28 of their working girls, and whose arrest in 1964 uncovered violent networks of corruption and sexual exploitation in those states.

The specific reasons why Mexico City started such a fierce fight against prostitution centers are not only related to the moral efforts of the postrevolutionary state, but also with a need to adopt the modern requirements set by international organizations. During these years, the supremacy of Mexico City —the economic, social and cultural center of the country— depended directly on the president and could be used to demonstrate the government was following the international decision-making process. Although the regulation of the sex trade was just one of the elements of the government agenda, the study of its regulations and prohibitions provides understanding of the role played by sexuality and gender in the organization of the state and the construction of the nation.

In this sense, Claudio Lomnitz's ideas prove useful. According to the anthropologist, weak national identities risk unintentionally showing the fractures of the system they belong to, which would mean a wrong strategy within the international game. In order to gain strength, each group or country questions the main elements of national identity and takes measures to strengthen it through the basic principles which are part of such a process: "first [...] the national state is a vehicle for the modernization of people that share a set of values and traditions; second [...] this process of modernization chiefly serves the interests of national community and not those of foreigners; and third [...] nationalism is a sign of progressive modernity and not of backwardness."⁹⁴ In this process, there were members of the state that had been integrated into the public life of the nation, such as workers and peasants, while many others were marginalized, such as madames. From the moment the government decided who had to be in or out of the national project, all types of negotiations were underway. *Matronas* identified themselves as part of the nation at the time they understood and

⁹⁴ Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico...*, 128.

interiorized the language the government repeated every day. Using the rhetoric of the revolution they mistrusted foreigners and asked for a more strict application of law for those not loving the nation, and, therefore, not invested in its development. Madames also tried to advocate progress by proposing a new system of labor according to the rules set by the state; they attempted to finance medical attention and instruction for all prostitutes working for them, or even tried to join the state through UDPECA. They sought, by all means, for the state to regard them as Mexicans and not as criminals; as administrators of the sex trade and not as exploiters; as part of the nation, not as aliens to it.

Nevertheless, the laws punishing procuring did not change, and the government determined that brothels and their owners were remnants of old times which were not compatible with the achievements of the revolution. As a result, madames lost ground under the closures and their immediate consequences: the rise in extortion, male pimping and street solicitation. After losing several battles, most of the matronas hid in clandestine spaces, and those with enough money and influence negotiated their permanent presence within the urban landscape. Many sex workers had to do their job under the new schemes of the sex trade.

It is not that the brothel always represented a social gathering or an intellectual oasis for the women working there, as noted by the sarcastic tone of Novo. However, the disappearance of the French system left prostitutes exposed, with less options: scattered. They, just like the matronas, did not inherit the benefits of revolution.

Chapter IV

Trading in Women on the Silver Screen and in Real Life: Pimps and Street Solicitation, 1930-1952

In 1947, moviegoers in Mexico City witnessed a fierce fight between a movie villain, Ledo (Jorge Arriaga), and honest Pepe *el toro* (Pedro Infante), who had been jailed for a crime he had not committed. Inside a dreadful cell, Ledo and two accomplices tried to kill Pepe, but, after defeating Ledo's partners, Pepe speared Ledo in the eye. Subdued, face bleeding and visible only through the cell peephole, Ledo stated one of the most emblematic phrases in Mexican cinema: "I killed the pawnbroker... Pepe *el toro* is innocent!"¹

Nosotros los pobres is one of the most watched movies in the history of Mexican cinema. Other scenes from *Nosotros los pobres* [We, the Poor] and its sequel *Ustedes los ricos* [You, the Rich] have remained in the popular mindset for more than half a century. Despite not having won any award from critics, public favor turned it into a blockbuster. The film lasted one year in movie theaters, and around seven years after its release a survey placed it first among the most widely-screened movies in the country. Its success has continued for decades, in part because it has been shown on primetime television on numerous occasions.²

In these films, director Ismael Rodríguez made melodramas in which *arrabal* [shantytown] dwellers face the traps of modernity. The films display the virtues of those who live in poverty with honesty and solidarity. Nevertheless, this community includes those who represent the existing vices of a city which was growing in leaps and bounds: both prostitution and drugs co-exist within the

¹*Nosotros los Pobres*. Directed by Ismael Rodríguez. Mexico: Películas Rodríguez, 1947 [Yo maté a la usurera... ¡Pepe *el toro* es inocente!] Merely searching "*Pepe el toro es inocente*" on the Internet proves how long the phrase has been part of Mexican popular culture. On the internet there are a vast number of images and photographs in which this phrase is used for political criticism, art, or humor.

² Emilio García Riera, *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano* (Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara/CONACULTA/Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1993), 162-3; Carlos Monsiváis, "Mythologies," in Paulo Antonio Paraguá, *Mexican Cinema* (London: British Film Institute/IMCINE), 124.

arrabal and affect the relation between neighbors. However, the main enemies came from outside: the greedy wealthy classes, like the criminals, both search for their own benefit at all costs. Although these groups were antagonistic towards the poor—who bear their sorrows with dignity—the rich were redeemed through repentance, while criminals had to be physically defeated by the hero of story.

Ledo is a very particular breed of city delinquent: *el malviviente* [lowlife]—a man without a fixed address, who earns a living from diverse illegal activities such as theft, scams or exploiting women. Although the pimps can do these activities simultaneously, living off prostitution provided a stable income. For example, in *Ustedes los ricos* Ledo (known from then on as *el tuerto* [the one-eyed]) received money from a prostitute while he was in prison. In the city this kind of criminal could find everything he needed: a concentration of financial resources, the growing nightlife, and the possibility of anonymity.³ This environment made pimps a common sight along the streets of Mexico City during the first half of the twentieth century.

The objective of this chapter is to explain how, despite the Federal Government's campaign to ban procuring from 1940 onwards, the lowlifes (playing the role of pimps) took over downtown streets and avenues, nightclubs and dance halls. I will also analyze the main consequences of gender change in the management of sexual commerce in Mexico City, as well as the characteristics of male-controlled procuring. According to records from the *Fondo Cárceles del Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México*, from 1940 to 1952, over 700 persons were tried for *lenocinio*. During the first years of deregulated prostitution, most of the subjects arrested for procuring were women, but from 1946 on, men started to outnumber them so greatly that by the beginning of the 1950s, 99% of the accused were male (Table 1, Chapter 1).

³*Ustedes los Ricos*. Directed by Ismael Rodríguez. Mexico: Rodríguez Hermanos, 1948.

As explained in Chapters 1 and 2, this was mainly because the authorities' main targets were the prostitution centers registered by the authorities themselves, i.e. brothels, *casas de citas* and assignation houses, most of which were managed by women. Along with the drastic reduction of brothels and the disappearance of the zone of tolerance in 1939, street solicitation and violence in sexual commerce increased rapidly. On the streets, prostitutes were left exposed to extortion from police officers and coercion from pimps. The threats, blows, injuries, and even deaths that sex workers suffered at the hands of their pimps were depicted in the press and in numerous movies of the so-called Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (1935-1955), particularly during the presidential regime of Miguel Alemán (1946-1952), a period when the popular cinema subgenre known as *cine de cabareteras*—in which the exploiters are the main antagonists—was in all its glory.⁴

Although *Nosotros los pobres* and *Ustedes los ricos* do not belong to this genre, scenes from both movies are an important part of this analysis. These movies and their protagonists constitute an essential element of Mexican culture. Even though prostitution is not the central theme of both movies, *el tuerto* embodies the vice of the big city and is introduced as a model of masculinity, corrupting not only women, but also the behavior of low-class men.

Using cinema, and other sources of information such as newspaper stories, magazine articles, images and archive documents, my analysis suggests that the hegemony of men in the management of Mexico City's sexual commerce was consolidated in the 1940s, for three main reasons. First, the lifestyle of *el malviviente* represented a desired model of masculinity for many of the numerous men who migrated to the capital at that time: the social status, style of dressing, dancing, and the number of women they could dominate. It represented, in many cases, a more tempting option than working

⁴ In a broad sense the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema is considered to have lasted throughout the 1940s, although some experts only take the years of World War II (1941-1945) into account, and there are also some who consider that the cinema boom period expanded for more than two decades, from the mid-1930s to the end of the 1950s. Julia Tuñón, *Mujeres de Luz y Sombra en el Cine Mexicano. La construcción de una imagen, 1939-1952* (Mexico: El Colegio de México/Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía), 13.

in factories, workshops or construction sites; in other words, it meant a more convenient entrance ticket to modern life in the big city. The second factor that strengthened the position of pimps was the little attention authorities paid to their activities as exploiters of women. From the years of regulated prostitution onwards, bureaucrats from diverse ranks watched and punished, more severely, the women in charge of the legally registered places of sexual commerce. Lastly, the physical and sexual abuse that characterized the relationship between pimps and prostitutes represented a serious hazard for the women who wished to report their exploiters, press charges against them, or take their trials to completion. These women found little support from the judges. The normalization of violence against women at that time echoed the resolutions of the authorities. As a result many pimps received shorter sentences and were free to continue their regular activities.

In order to analyze the suggested hypotheses, this chapter is divided in three sections. In the first two, the concept of procurers and their lifestyles will be defined, as well as the context in which they got by, and the elements that made some of them the most important pimps of the 1930s and 1940s. Finally, special emphasis will be put on the study of coercion within the pimp-prostitute relationship. By examining several legal proceedings, in particular from 1946 to 1952, testimonies from both women and their exploiters will reveal the methods used to hook these women; the working conditions that were established; and the legal criterion according to which these men were tried; pointing out, of course, the differences and similarities in managing justice for the women in charge of prostitution houses at the beginning of the 1940s.

A Danzón dedicated to El Suavecito and his new suit

In an elegant automobile Pepe *el toro* is listening to a woman, even more elegant, who is telling him that the matriarch of the powerful family she belongs to is planning to buy Pepe's bank debts with the objective of confiscating his carpentry workshop. Knowing he cannot possibly afford to pay his debts, the woman extends a wad of money, which Pepe, dignified, rejects as he says: "Well, you

should know that although you see me with these cheap clothes I don't take women's money because I'm used to earning it to give it to them, that's what men are here for, isn't it? Do you know why I have these calloused hands? For my wife's earrings, her dresses [...], her food and my *torito's* [...] that's why when I caress her with these tough hands from working for her and for her son she loves me more and respects me, because that's what makes me a man."⁵ Shortly after that, both Pepe and the elegant woman head to the cabaret "Nereidas," where Pepe receives many compliments for his beautiful companion, the most important of which is a song dedicated by the band, who shout: "Hey, family! A *danzón* dedicated to Pepe *el toro* and the educated woman who is accompanying him." As they dance, the woman makes note of Pepe popularity. Pepe, without hiding his pride, tells her that the reason is because he beat Ledo: "he was the boss here, and nobody wanted him."⁶

In another cabaret, an essential setting for the movie *Ángeles del Arrabal* [Shantytown Angels] — released in 1949, some months after *Ustedes los Ricos* — a thief tells a man, known as *el suavecito*, about the difficulties he has been through after a jewelry store robbery: the deaths of a policeman and a gang member, an accomplice disappearing with the booty, and, of course, the police chase. *El suavecito* advises him: "This business ain't worth the fright. Do as I do: women. Here I am, well-groomed, well-fed, and with no trouble from the cops." That same night, a man dares *el suavecito* to fight, but as the pimp does not know how to defend himself, he falls into a puddle and his elegant outfit is spoiled. The next time he appears at the cabaret, all his acquaintances notice a change, which the band announces: "Hey, family! A *danzón* dedicated to Manuel Sánchez *el suavecito* and his new

⁵ *Ustedes los Ricos*. Directed by Ismael Rodríguez. Mexico: Rodríguez Hermanos, 1948. [pues sépase que aunque ande con esta ropa corriente no agarro dinero de las mujeres porque estoy acostumbrado a ganarlo para dárselos a ellas, para eso somos hombres ¿no? ¿Sabe usted de qué son estos callos? de los aretes pa[ra mi esposa], de sus vestidos [...] de la comida para ella y pa' mi *torito* [...] por eso cuando la acaricio con estas manos rasposas de trabajar pa' ella y pa' su hijo me quiere más y me respeta, porque eso es lo que me hace ser hombre]

⁶ [{"Hey familia! Danzón dedicado a Pepe *el toro* y culta dama que lo acompaña"}/"era el mandamás aquí y nadie lo quería"]

suit.” Proud and satisfied, Sánchez gives the woman he is with an inkling that it is time to show off his abilities on the dance floor.⁷

Both scenes depicted show two men who are complete opposites. Pepe is head of his family and a provider who boosts his pride through hard work (not only evident when he speaks, but also visible in his hands), and is incapable of taking money from a woman, no matter how difficult things are. On the other hand, the pride of *el suavecito* is based on making women work for him, as well as on showing off, through his way of dressing, his control over them. On the screen, both represent contradictory sides of masculinity that many men who migrated to Mexico City during the 1930s and 1940s could imitate. On the soft, desirable side, is Pepe, who, like most of the honest men of Mexican Cinema’s Golden Age, is compensated for all his suffering with the love and recognition of his family and friends.⁸ On the darker side, the undesirable *suavecito* is murdered by another pimp. The pimps’ excesses shown in film melodramas of that time always met a bitter end.

However, off the screen, moral condemnation of these fictional characters and the real characters they inspired was not unanimous. Despite the fact that film, medical, and literary discourse harshly criticized pimps in general, many migrants saw in them a practical and very attractive lifestyle; in the context of fast-paced urbanization in Mexico City, status-flaunting was essential, and pimps turned it into a key element of their behavior. In order to understand the concepts of the honest worker and the *malviviente* it is necessary to go back to the early 1920s, when Mexico’s capital city began its economic boom.

⁷ *Ángeles del Arrabal*. Directed by Raúl de Anda. Mexico: Producciones Raúl de Anda, 1949. [“ese negocio no da pa’ sustos. Hazle como yo, mano: las viejas. Aquí me tienes, bien entacuchado, bien comido y sin líos con la chota”/“¡Hey familia! Danzón dedicado a Manuel Sánchez *el suavecito* y su traje nuevo”]

⁸ Pepe *el toro* is played by Pedro Infante, probably the most popular actor in the history of Mexican cinema. Throughout his career Infante incarnated, through the characters he played, the desirable Mexican masculinity (considered even perfect) in rural contexts as well as urban. Some experts, like Carlos Monsiváis, have regarded him as a bridge for understanding the changes brought about by urbanization and modernity in Mexico at that time. Carlos Monsiváis, “Mythologies,” in *Mexican Cinema*, ed. Paulo Antonio Paranaguá (London: British Film Institute), 125. Concerning the importance of the figure of Pedro Infante in Mexican popular culture: Anne Rubenstein, “Bodies, Cities, Cinema: Pedro Infante’s Death as a Political Spectacle,” in *Fragments of a Golden Age. The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940*, eds. Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein and Eric Zolov (Durham: Duke University Press), 199-233.

From that moment on, and during the next two decades, the city grew and incorporated technological changes brought about by modernization into its inhabitants' daily lives. The radio and cinema, for instance, became windows to the outside world as they connected the audience with the great European and American cities by way of music, dance, fashion, and behavior. Moreover, the new middle class and the growing variety of nightlife aimed to reflect the cosmopolitan character of Mexico City. The thousands of migrants that entered the capital city every year had to face the differentiation, clearer with time, between rural and urban life within the country.⁹ Nevertheless, the relationship between the city and its inhabitants was complex. In those years, in the media and in daily life “the ranch habits and a Hollywood-like copied *glamour* seem[ed] to join.”¹⁰

Just like the city, the underworlds that were part of it gradually transformed as well. This was something not missed by the professionals in charge of planning health policies in Mexico (doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists), who aimed at correcting the “moral crisis” of sexual commerce in the city. Influenced by the debate about prostitution at the League of Nations, reformists introduced male responsibility into their analysis for the first time, regarding the spread of venereal diseases and prostitution.¹¹ Katherine E. Bliss notes that public health officials tried to instill “modern and revolutionary” values into men who regularly attended prostitution houses in the city. Using the ideas of work, responsible money management, and fatherhood, these social reformers included the dichotomy of “true man”/“dangerous man” into their discourse.¹²

During the 1920s and 1930s the Department of Public Health spread the idea that a moderate sex life, preferably within marriage, was the path the “true man” should follow, in order to become a

⁹ Julia Tuñón, “La Ciudad Actriz: la Imagen Urbana en el Cine Mexicano (1940-1955).” *Historias* 27 (1991-2):190-1.

¹⁰ Julia Tuñón, *Mujeres de Luz y Sombra...*, 43. [parec[ía]n conjuntarse las herencias del rancho con un *glamour* imitado de los estilos de Hollywood] Emphasis in the original.

¹¹ In the first chapter I analyzed the relationship between the League of Nations and the discussions about prostitution in Mexico in detail. Many of the measures dictated from Geneva had their origin in feminist proposals, which explains, to a great extent, that the officials, all men, had incorporated clients and pimps into the discourse promoted from the state.

¹² Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions. Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 126-133.

responsible breadwinner who did not contribute to the deterioration of his family or the nation by spreading venereal diseases. The “dangerous man” preferred promiscuity to fatherhood, and wasting money on women to his family’s well being. However, the client was not the worst subclass within this category. Even more despicable than the promiscuous father was the man who earned a living from the prostitution of others. The pimp, completely opposed to the “true man,” was capable of resigning himself to the idea of work as well as of fatherhood, and subverted gender roles as one or several women supported him financially. In addition, vanity and selfishness were part of the “improper” masculinity of the “dangerous man.” In a journal of criminal sciences in 1936, doctor Alfonso Quiroz wrote: “the man who is indifferent to his essential attribute, work [...] dedicates himself instead to an exaggerated care of his body.”¹³

Other men, who can be catalogued as middle-class clients, also criticized the pimps’ lifestyle. In books, news reports and chronicles, writers as well as journalists documented the world of prostitution; in many of their writings they described the time spent with prostitutes themselves, and, on numerous occasions, expressed their empathy toward these women and their disdain for pimps. These stories contained *los malvivientes*, who, as exploiters, were known under different names that referred to their image (*chulos*, “good looking” or *cinturitas*, lit. “little narrow-waisted,” due to the suits they used to wear), as well as their unemployed status (*padrotes*, *pichis*, *rufianes*, *golfos*, *gígolos*, *vividores* or *mantenidos*; “slackers,” “ruffians,” “rakes,” “playboys”). In a 1934 book, Luis Ángel Rodríguez defines them: “[the playboy is an] individual who lives from the exploitation of women of easy virtue [...], elegant man, always well-dressed and attending the best bars of the Capital, sometimes he can be seen at the bullfight ring together with his day-off partner [...] not only is he the exploiter, but also

¹³ Alfonso Quiroz, “Prostitución masculina vs. prostitución femenina.” *Criminalia* 3, no.1 (September 1936):15, quoted in Katherine E. Bliss, *Compromised Positions...*, 133.

the executioner.”¹⁴ A year later, Carlos Lara, a contributor at the weekly *Detectives*, in one of his articles assured that the reason for a fight between two prostitutes could be none other than “a man. It must have been one of those [pimps] from the neighborhood, eye-catching ties, fallen-brim hats, tight suits, patent leather shoes, very shiny and squeaky.”¹⁵

At the same time, the imagery of prostitutes was changing. The popular weekly magazine *Detectives* ran for around 10 years from 1930 to 1940, following the narrative transmitted from medical, law and other media elites: the fallen woman as a victim of social circumstance. Unlike the previous century when sex workers were considered socially and physically ill individuals, condemned to perdition for generations, the new discourse pointed out the main cause of the women’s moral decay (mainly of the lower class) was: economical conditions, naivety, and the deceit of male and female pimps. The new schemes that were imposed from modernity gradually replaced traditional schemes.¹⁶ It was through these contrasts between old customs and new practices that the understanding and representation of gender relationships within sexual commerce were negotiated. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s there were legislative changes, health campaigns, songs, movies, and written stories in which the dichotomy of victim/villain was increasingly emphasized, i.e. the prostitute and the pimp; however, neither did she reach complete redemption, nor he was despised unambiguously.

The Criminal Code was modified at the end of 1929 in order to punish those people who lived off prostitution without legal permission. Taking into account that madams registered with the Health Office were the link between the state and sexual commerce, it can be supposed that the main objective of this law was to punish men who exploited prostitutes who were not registered with

¹⁴ Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Janlas y Pájaros de Amor. Veinticinco Estampas del Vicio en México* (Toluca: Talleres Tipográficos “La Carpeta,” 1934), 20. [individuo que vive de la explotación de mujeres galantes [...] tipo elegante, siempre va bien vestido y concurre a las mejores cantinas de la Capital, se le puede ver algunas veces en los toros acompañado de su socia de asueto [...] no sólo es el explotador sino también el verdugo]

¹⁵ Carlos de Lara, “Yo Apache.” *Detectives*, December 16, 1934, 9, 16. [un hombre. Debía ser uno de esos [padrotes] de barrio, corbatas vistosas, sombreros muy caídos del ala, trajes ajustados, zapatos de charol, muy brillantes y rechinadores]

¹⁶ Julia Tuñón, *Mujeres de Luz...*, 45-7.

the authorities or independent sex workers.¹⁷ However, during most of the 1930s less than 10 men were tried for this crime.¹⁸ Moreover, while the Department of Health promoted the ideal of the “true man” by means of leaflets and factory talks, and in parks and places of public amusement, experts accepted that the tendency of Mexican men to have several sexual partners was a natural instinct, difficult to change.¹⁹

In the world of cinema, movies elevated the figure of the good prostitute, but, regardless of the sacrifice or noble reasons behind them, these women could not fully reintegrate into society. Rarely did they find their *happy ending* with a man. Biological maternity was denied to them, and on several occasions they lived on suffering due to their hidden double life, feeling they would rather die than let their loved ones know their real occupation. Despite the reformist discourse on rehabilitation or alleged understanding, prostitution was still regarded as a shameful activity which left marks and was difficult to escape from. Agustín Lara, one of the most important songwriters at the time, advised the protagonist of the movie *Aventurera* through a song which became a radio hit: “Because the shame of your grim fate withered your beautiful spring, make your way less rough: price your love dearly.”²⁰ At the same time, discourse in cinema and other media such as *Detectives* presented pimps as selfish men who had found their own way to integrate into urban life. Despite the tragic ending that punished selfish conduct, throughout the narrative the pimps seemed proud of their violent behavior, physical appearance, and dancing skills, as well as their ability to control women and earn money. Being men without remorse, they did not even consider the idea of fatherhood or totally rejected it (in *Víctimas*

¹⁷ Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions...*, 138.

¹⁸ These figures are based on the review I made of the records of prisoners arrested for procuring in the *Fondo Cárceles, Sección Penitenciaria del Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México*, from 1934 to 1939.

¹⁹ Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions...*, 128-131.

²⁰ *Aventurera*. Directed by Alberto Gout. Mexico: Cinematográfica Calderón, 1949. [Ya que la infamia de tu ruin destino marchitó tu admirable primavera, haz menos escabroso tu camino: vende caro tu amor]

del Pecado, [Victims of Sin] evil Rodolfo demands from a prostitute, as a proof of her loyalty, that she abandon their child in a trash container).²¹

Although despicable, the lowlife's lifestyle represented to some an entrance to modernity and a much faster and effective method of social ascent than working in workshops or factories. In the context of Mexico City's urbanization, the middle-class population grew, as did the city. According to Julia Tuñón, this social class was formed of diverse groups: those who had fallen into hard times due to the 1910 Revolution, those who rose in status under the same circumstances, and even sectors of the petite-bourgeoisie. Although the best-positioned groups moved towards certain areas of the city where status and modernity were mirrored in the design of great houses, many of the city inhabitants who were part of the middle class lived in the same neighborhoods as the working class did.²² American influence also started to show throughout everyday life. Apartment blocks represented the ideal of middle-class people who could not afford a house with a garden.²³ In daily life, the use of English words became more natural. It was necessary to leave traditional customs behind and present oneself as a modern person, different from the low classes and the rural world. Eating habits were transformed as well. Carlitos, the main character of the novel *Las Batallas en el Desierto* ["Battles in the Desert"] recalls:

As we were modernized, we introduced in our speech terms that had been considered *pochismos* in movies [...] we started to eat hamburgers, pies, donuts [...] Fresh juice drinks of lemon, Jamaica and sage were buried by Coca-cola [...] while] we, the poor, still drank *tepache*. Our parents were getting used to [drinking] *jaibol* [highball], which at the beginning tasted like medicine. In my house tequila is forbidden, I heard uncle Julián say. I only serve whisky to my guests: we have to *whiten* the taste of the Mexicans.²⁴

²¹ *Víctimas del Pecado*. Directed by Emilio Fernández: Cinematográfica Calderón, 1951.

²² Julia Tuñón, "La Ciudad Actriz..." 190-1.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ José Emilio Pacheco, *Las Batallas en el Desierto* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 2008), 11-2. [Mientras tanto nos modernizábamos, incorporamos en nuestra habla términos que primero habían sonado como pochismos en las películas [...] empezábamos a comer hamburguesas, paps, donas [...] la cocacola sepultaba las aguas frescas [...] los pobres seguían tomando tepache. Nuestros padres se habituaban al jaibol que en un principio les supo a medicina. En mi casa está prohibido el tequila, le escuché decir a mi tío Julián. Yo nada más sirvo whisky a mis invitados: hay que blanquear el gusto de los mexicanos]

These tendencies were also reflected in the narratives about the world of prostitution. By the end of 1935, Carlos de Lara, a *Detectives* contributor, aimed to portray the life of Mexican “gigolos” through the life of Guillermo Ortíz, who, according to the author, was an old schoolmate. As the story goes, Guillermo’s mother used to work long shifts washing the floors of the zone of tolerance in Órgano Street, and one of the women there became Guillermo’s lover and took him to the movie theater every day. Although at first he “shyly” [tímidamente] accepted the invitations, he soon considered it Hermelinda’s “obligation” [obligación] to make him have fun. After she dies in a hospital (it is implicit that it is due to venereal disease) Guillermo gets a new lover, who later runs away with one of the “gigolos” Guillermo used to spend time with; “thus Guillermo Ortíz became William.” This kind of man, according to Lara, always ended their conversations saying “okey,” and preferred to use the English version of their names: “Joe,” “Frank,” etc. At the moment Guillermo thoroughly adopted the gigolo lifestyle, “his mother stopped washing floors, and William, now always William, could wear those suits, the ‘little narrow-waisted’ ones that cost thirty-five pesos in cash and eighty in installments.”²⁵

In his article, Lara tries to present a critique by comparing Mexican and French gigolos. He considers the latter brave men who support “their women,” whereas the Mexicans “are cowardly, disgusting, vicious, and, most of them, treacherous [...] they always abandon their lover in danger, and only the fear of the lack of money makes [them] defend them [their women].” Nevertheless, Lara does not make these men directly responsible for their own conduct: “the ones [the gigolos] from Mexico, grotesque caricatures of the screen heroes, are the way they are because that is what women who dream of Clark Gable want.”²⁶ The author of *Jaulas y Pájaros de Amor* [Cages and Birds

²⁵ Carlos de Lara, “Los Cinturitas de la Academia,” *Detectives*, October 25, 1935, pp. 13, 16. [“así se convirtió Guillermo Ortíz en William”/ “su madre dejó de lavar pisos y William, ya de plano William, pudo vestir esos trajes, los de ‘cinturita’ que cuestan al contado treinta y cinco pesos y ochenta en abonos”]

²⁶ Ibid. [“sus mujeres”/“son cobardes, repugnantes, viciosos y casi todos traidores [...] siempre abandon[an] a la amante en peligro y sólo el temor a la falta de dinero [los] hace defenderlas”/ “los de México, caricatura grotesca de los héroes de la pantalla, son así porque así lo quieren las mujeres que sueñan con Clark Gable”]

of Love], Luis Ángel Rodríguez, not only shared Lara's viewpoint, but also downplayed the abuse prostitutes received from their exploiters: "nevermind! Women have a ray of light in their life." Rodríguez argued they would get money from clients, so their men would always have new, elegant and fashionable clothes: "when they go out they will be proud, and their mouths [will want to] shout to the world, This is my man! Look how handsome he is! Watch out, who wants to take him away from me!"²⁷

Although the stories in magazines and film scripts were fiction and constantly criticized the pimps' lifestyle, many of the men who consumed these representations could perceive the advantages of this lifestyle. In William's story, for instance, at the moment he decides to live off the exploitation of women and adopt a complete gigolo attitude, he enters immediately (and with the lightest effort) into a social position which allows him not only to take his mother out of an exhausting and low-paying job, but also to save himself from a similar destiny in a factory or workshop, all the while earning the admiration of many women. Status was within the reach of those capable of reinventing themselves inside the city.

It was within this context that fashion turned into a key element of identity and for displaying class status. The style of dressing allowed a first-glance indication of someone's origin, as well as of his or her purchasing power. According to Emma Yanes, a railway man at that time assured that, when arriving home from his workplace: "the first thing I did was go to the steam baths to remove any stains, the smell of rails. Of course I liked my job, but not that much. The denim was for the poor, everyone wanted a suit [and] patent leather shoes."²⁸

²⁷ Luis Ángel Rodríguez, *Jaulas y Pájaros...*, 22 ["¡que importa! las mujeres tienen un rayo de sol en su vida"/ "cuando salgan a la calle irán orgullosas y sus bocas [querrán] gritar a todo el mundo, ¡Este es mi hombre! ¡Miradlo que guapo! ¡Cuidado con la que quiera quitármelo!"]

²⁸ Emma Yanes, "Los Cuarenta, Seductora Ciudad," *Historias* 27 (October, 1991-March 1992), 176. [lo primero que hacía era irme al vapor para que se me quitara lo chorreado, el olor a riel. Claro que me gustaba mi trabajo, pero no era para tanto. La mezclilla la usaban los pobres, todos queríamos llegarle al trajecito, a los zapatos de charol]

Apart from wearing the right clothes, it was essential to gain the respect of those who visited Mexico City's nightclubs. There, despite the evident social division, it was possible to be in contact with the same kind of entertainment that middle and high classes had access to. For example, the *Salón México*, one of the most popular clubs, was divided into three halls into which people could enter according to their financial capabilities. As a result, all sorts were in attendance: well-known sportspeople, celebrities and artists like Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Agustín Lara, María Félix, and prostitutes and pimps from the neighborhoods nearby.²⁹ In spite of the well-marked social boundaries inside the *Salón México*, access to higher social status was only a few steps away. The important thing was to stand out; dance happened to be the appropriate form to do so. Every weekend, or at dance contests, dancers could show that it was possible to achieve the recognition and admiration of regular customers through dexterity. Vicente Fernández *el alegría* [the joy], one of the best *danzón* dancers of the 1940s, recalled in 1985:

The best dancers [...] wore [...] really exclusive clothes. I could not still dress the way they did, but I had left my *manta* [natural cotton] clothes. I worked selling lettuces at the Jamaica Market. The big ones lived off women; they wouldn't be factory workers or employees, not at all. They were called "Caifanes." They were my idols. One could hit the big one, out of work. I became more agile, a better dancer little by little. My first suit [...] cost four pesos, what I earned in a month. I also bought a pair of shirts [...] and a pair of high-class shoes: two tones. When you start to succeed women are abundant.³⁰

Within that context success was achieved through respect and fame, though earned in a violent and dishonorable manner. Migration and the growth of the city saw the number of factory and manual labor jobs increase, though that was not what many new inhabitants dreamed of. The model of the honest man —like Pepe *el toro* living in poverty with dignity— was not attractive enough, because that long working days and modesty did not pay off. For many of these men the goal was *to be*

²⁹ Sophia Koutsoyannis, "Immoral but Profitable: the Social and Cultural History of Cabarets in Mexico City (1920-1965)" (PhD diss., York University, 2010), 38-39.

³⁰ "Salón Colonia," *Diva*, November, 1985, quoted in Emma Yanes, "Los Cuarenta..." 174. [Los mejores bailarines [...] vestían [...] ropa exclusivísima. Yo todavía no podía vestir como ellos pero ya había dejado atrás mi ropa de manta. Trabajaba como lechuguero en el Mercado de Jamaica. Los grandes se mantenían de las mujeres, qué iban a ser obreros y empleados, a volar. Les decían "Caifanes." Eran mis ídolos. Uno la podía hacer fuera del trabajo. Yo poco a poco me fui haciendo más ducho, mejor bailarín. Mi primer traje [...] me costó cuatro pesos, lo que ganaba en un mes. Compré también un par de camisas [...] y un par de zapatos de catego: dos tonos. Cuando se empieza a tener éxito sobran las mujeres]

somebody, to earn a reputation, to achieve distinction. Don Felipe, a mechanic, remembered: “around 1946 the ones who didn’t aim so high [...] wanted to be factory workers, or mechanic assistants at most, but that wouldn’t give them a name, it looked bad. The best ones [*los chingones*, “the badass”] like us aimed to be boxers [...] bullfighters [...] pimps [...] thieves [...] and even evil men like *el Goyo* Cárdenas, who buried who knows how many [women] in the garden of his house.”³¹ Activities that required physical skills while earning notoriety in public spaces became the ideal for some aspiring social climbers. The idols of *el alegría* turned into role models for other men. Sportsmen as well as criminals appeared continuously in the press. Don Felipe’s reference to Goyo Cárdenas not only shows disdain towards violence against women, it also reflects the fame the serial killer gained. Cárdenas prompted such a fascination among city dwellers that a lot of memorabilia related to him circulated during those years, from picture cards to comics. He wrote some fictional stories for newspapers while in jail, and his crimes inspired a song, a play and even a short pornographic film called *El Asesino* [The Killer].³²

This is the context that could explain the success that *el suavecito* had off the screen. As a secondary character in a movie that *México Cinema* called “a shame for the country and for Mexican cinematography,” and “the lowest, most indecent and insulting movie that he [Raúl de Anda] has dared to produce,” *el suavecito* gained such acceptance among the public that a year later his name was the title of another movie (in which the character played by Víctor Parra was, of course, the protagonist).³³ Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that in this movie, the physical and verbal

³¹ “Los Cuarenta: Cada Quien su Esquina,” *Encuentro*, 1984, quoted in Emma Yanes, “Los Cuarenta...,” 174. [por ahí de 1946 los menos soñadores [...] le tiraban a ser obreros, cuando mucho ayudantes de mecánico, pero eso no daba nombre, se veía mal. Los chingones como nosotros le tirábamos a boxeadores [...] toreros [...] padrotes [...] rateros [...] y hasta hombres malvados como el Goyo Cárdenas que enterró a no sé cuantas en el Jardín de su casa] Gregorio Cárdenas Hernández, better known as Goyo Cárdenas, was a serial killer who, in 1942, took over the city newspaper pages with his story. An excellent chronicle of his case can be found in: Ana Luisa Luna, “Goyo Cárdenas, un asesino diferente,” in *Nota Roja en los 40s* (Mexico: Diana, 1993), 67-94.

³² Carlos Monsiváis, “Fuegos de Nota Roja,” *Nexos* 176 (1992), 27-35.

³³*El Suavecito*. Directed by Fernando Méndez. Mexico: Cinematográfica Intercontinental, 1951. Quoted in Emilio García Riera, *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano* (Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara/CONACULTA/Instituto Mexicano de

violence that characterized *el suavecito* in *Ángeles del Arrabal* was presented in a more measured way. The insensitive pimp, who in 1949 tried to prostitute his sister-in-law —and who was about to beat her while she was in labor at the film’s end (just because he wanted to know where some stolen jewels were)— now gives money to a little girl in the street so she can buy herself a new doll.

The new version of *el suavecito* included a selfless mother —who believes her son works in Acapulco, when he actually just has fun with female foreigners— and Lupita, a *decent* woman, who cannot openly confess she loves him because he does not have a permanent job. With these two women, Roberto Ramírez (a different name from the character in *Ángeles del Arrabal*) shows vulnerability, and sometimes shame about his behavior. Moreover, the movie *El suavecito* redeems the *malviviente*, when, in the film’s last minutes, Roberto regrets participating in the plot to accuse the honest man (who courted Lupita) of murder. After confessing the truth at the police station and after the arrest of the real murderer, *el suavecito* heads to the bus station in order to escape from the city. There, he is intercepted by the murderer’s accomplices, and brutally beaten. Lupita, who has now heard that Roberto did the right thing, finds him on the floor and tells him that she always loved him. At that moment he passes out (or maybe he dies for the second time).

While some elements that may have caught the audience’s attention in *Ángeles del Arrabal* are still present in this character, in accordance with the *cinturita* stereotype, it is possible that in *El Suavecito* the filmmakers aimed to show that through repentance it was possible to find some elements of the “true man” in these men, like honesty and sacrifice. In return for these qualities, they could obtain inner peace and the love of a good woman. Although surely the film was made with intentions of getting the most out of the character’s popularity and generating a financial reward, with the moral codes of that time, it must have been almost impossible to present *el suavecito* in a leading role with

Cinematografía, 1993), vol. 5: 1949-1950, 64. [“una vergüenza para el país y para la cinematografía mexicana”/“la más baja, procaz e injuriosa película que ha osado producir [Raúl de Anda]”

the character's original elements; that would have meant that the cinema turned him into an anti-hero, granting total approval to a criminal.

However, the audience could appreciate a modern well-dressed man who caught women's (either Mexican or foreign) attention; who always managed to draw admiration when he took over the dance floor. He spent dollars and used English constantly (Roberto asks his confused mother for "ham and eggs" at breakfast, and he repeats the phrase "güeramin [wait a min]"). In fact, in *El Suavecito*, choreographies are longer and more complex. The rhythms that the character dances masterfully are the *mambo* and *danzón*, musical genres that, together with the *cha ca chá*, appealed to the tastes of the middle and working classes who regularly attended dance halls and cabarets in the 1930s and 1940s. Establishments like *Salón Colonia*, *Waikiki*, *Salón México* or *Smyrna Club* were part of a growing industry that had its golden age during these decades, and their clientele were all those who had fame or wished to have it.³⁴ In 1910, in Veracruz's working-class neighborhoods, the announcement "Hey, family! A *danzón* dedicated to..." [Hey familia, *danzón* dedicado a...] began to be used, but it was during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, and mostly thanks to its influence, that this cry from orchestra directors became a popular way to greet celebrities who visited the dancing halls, turning it into an essential part of urban life and culture of those years.³⁵

The men who migrated to the capital city and tried to make a living at one of the common jobs had direct contact with the stereotype of the pimp, and also with the critique at the cinema, or in magazines or newspapers; nevertheless, they could simultaneously perceive the benefits of such a lifestyle through these same media. Despite the punishment *el malviviente* received on screen, in the movies the audience saw pimps incarnating modernity and living carelessly, without worries, and

³⁴ Alejandro L. Madrid and Robin R. Moore, *Danzón. Circum-Caribbean Dialogues in Music and Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 154-5. A detailed study about more than four decades of cabaret history in Mexico can be found in Sophia Koutsoyannis "Immoral but Profitable..." 2010. Also, indispensable is Carlos Medina Caracheo, "El Club de Medianoche Waikiki: Un Cabaret de 'Época' en la Ciudad de México, 1935-1954" (M.A. thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2010).

³⁵ Alejandro L. Madrid and Robin R. Moore, *Danzón...*, 154.

inspiring fear. Magazines, in spite of appearing to disapprove of such activities, created a space to blame women for the behavior of the playboys, and even to grow a discreet admiration for their lifestyle. It is likely that while many of the working-class men were looking for a job or resting from their activities, their imagination was fed with these entertainment sources. On the screen, on paper, and in the streets, they could witness the possibilities and immediateness of a lifestyle they could not find in the factories or workshops. Cabarets, magazines, and, very probably, everyday discussions were full of stories about men who had conquered dancing halls and important areas of the city. *El méxico, el colo, Paco el elegante, el media luz*, among others, were real men who were part of an urban culture, and who, as will be seen in the following section, caused a mix of fear and fascination among Mexico City inhabitants between the 1930s and 1950s.

(See next page for pictures)



Figure. 16 The *malviviente* lifestyle allowed men that migrated to the city to gain access to the benefits of modernity. By adopting the lowlifes' attitude (that included clothing, dancing, and illegal activities) the migrants could climb the social ladder faster than just working in factories or on some other manual activities.

Figure 17. Mexican cinema from 1935 to 1955 featured pimps many times. *La Mancha de Sangre* (The Blood Stain), filmed in 1937 but not released until 1943 due to censorship, shows the story of Guillermo, a young and inexperienced man from the countryside that has just migrated to Mexico city. In the cabaret "la mancha de sangre" he meets a prostitute named Camelia and some *malvivientes* whose boss is *el príncipe* (the prince). Camelia and Guillermo start a relationship, and little by little he becomes involved in *el príncipe's* businesses. Although Camelia's (foreigner) pimp disapproves of the relationship, the film shows an independent woman that can take care of herself and even of her lover. She saves Guillermo from being deceived by his new friends.



In this movie, directed by Adolfo Best Maugart, we can perceive Guillermo's quick transformation. In a matter of weeks, he changes from being a shy guy from outside the city that entered the cabaret wearing working class clothes and with no money to pay for food (first picture above) to an elegant man. When Camelia sees him with his new outfit, Guillermo is talking loudly and inviting everyone in the cabaret drinks. She asks him: "Hey, what's going on with you, I hardly recognize you." He responds: "Nothing, I have money and a lot of joy" (picture on the left) **Figure 18.**

Infamous Pimps

During the first half of the twentieth century, movie theaters played a fundamental role in the entertainment of Mexico City's inhabitants. Men and women from all social classes regularly went to enjoy national and international productions on the screen. Among the frequent movie-goers were men like Odilón González Ortiz—who in 1934 declared in the *Ministerio Público* [Public Prosecutor] that he was unemployed, but supported by his concubine “including money for going to the movies”—or José Robles Robles—who in 1937 was prosecuted for impersonating a judicial police agent with a false badge used for free access to movie theaters, among other things. Their respective partners, Guadalupe Rivera Magaña and Esperanza Castro Perea, claimed they were frequently beaten by the men and forced to prostitute themselves.³⁶

In those same years, a man who signed his memoirs under the pseudonym Nick Trevi—and who identifies himself as “Arturo” in his story—began the first of many relationships he would maintain with prostitutes. At the early age of 15, he stopped living with his family and started to spend some nights at city cabarets. At the *Silvain* he met *la chavala*, a prostitute older than him, who decided to take him to her house to live with her, supporting him on the condition that he would not be with any other woman: “with me you will have no financial trouble, since I will be in charge of your clothes, food and shelter, and apart from that I will give you money for the movies and for your candies every day.”³⁷ At the beginning, Arturo accepted the terms of the relationship, however,

³⁶ Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (hereafter AHDF), Fondo: Cárceles, Sección Penitenciaria, Expedientes de Reos, Odilón González Ortiz (1934) Caja: 236, Expediente: 8213; and José Robles Robles (1937), Caja: 350, Expediente: 2368. [y hasta dinero para divertirse concurriendo al cine]

³⁷ Nick Trevi, *México en los años 40. Una Crónica Verídica del Mundo del Hampa y de la Vida Nocturna de hace 35 Años: “Salón México,” “Waikiki” y otros Antros Desaparecidos* (Mexico: Editormex, 1974), 52-3. I thank Carlos Medina Caracheo's generosity for the access to this source. [conmigo no tendrás que pasar apuros económicos, pues de tu ropa, tus alimentos y de tu casa yo me encargo y aparte te daré tus centavitos diariamente pa' tu cine y pa' tus dulces]

following his friends' advice —whom he met at the billiard hall and “who were pimps for real”— he decided to confront her.³⁸

With the aim of proving his manliness —since he was constantly told by his friends he was too young and naive to dominate a woman as experienced as *la chavala*, and to manage to get all her earnings— one night, Arturo told her he was fed up with her controlling the relationship. She told him, briefly but firmly, that if he wanted to follow his friends' advice, he should gather his belongings and go with them. Confused by his lover's reaction, Arturo did not know how to reply and obeyed her, which definitively ended the relationship. At that moment, Arturo decided to explore the underworld, moved by his “desire to live, to have a whore, suits, to know how to dance.”³⁹

It was highly probable that Odilón González and José Robles, like many of Arturo's contemporaries, coveted the fashion and some of the masculine attitudes they saw reflected on screen. Nevertheless, for many men, going to the movies meant not only consuming culture and entertainment, but also visiting a source for criminal activities, and witnessing a visible proof of the control they exercised over the women working for them.⁴⁰ Arturo quickly learned these lessons, and from then on he planned to follow his billiard hall friends' advice. It was 1934, and although he was still very young and unknown in the streets and cabarets, he had started to admire, from afar, those *malvivientes* who had made a reputation in the lower depths of the city as pimps.

These men became notorious not only at their regular nightclub haunts, but also in the media (mostly magazines and newspapers), which caused more people to know of their activities, and which, on occasion, made them reach celebrity status among their admirers. Some of the nicknames Arturo recalls in his memoirs are: *el colo*, *el media luz* (something like “the half-lighted”), *el méxico* and

³⁸ Nick Trevi, *México en los años 40...*, 57. [que sí eran verdaderamente padrotes]

³⁹ Nick Trevi, *México en los años 40...*, 85. [deseos de vivir, de tener puta, trajes, saber bailar]

⁴⁰ Regarding movie theaters in Mexico and gender behaviors in them see Anne Rubenstein, “Theaters of Masculinity. Moviegoing and Male Roles in Mexico before 1960,” in Victor M. Macías-González and Anne Rubenstein (eds.), *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 132-151.

Paco *el elegante* (“the elegant”). According to historian Carlos Medina Caracheo, the first might have referred to *el colo* Cora, a gunman who worked as actor and singer Jorge Negrete’s bodyguard in 1949.⁴¹ Nacho *el media luz* was a one-eyed man who was short, dark-skinned, and one-legged, with a scar on his face, who, just like *el méxico*, lacked the physical attributes *el colo* and Paco *el elegante*, who were considered “a pair of real Adonis.” From Arturo’s perspective, the lack of physical appeal turned *el media luz* and *el méxico* into better pimps, because they had to make an effort to “be very good pimps.”⁴²

Despite this observation, throughout his memoirs Arturo does not conceal the special admiration he felt towards Paco *el elegante*. Born in León, Guanajuato, Francisco Aldrete Medina was around 23 when Arturo first saw him, in the streets of the central neighborhood called Santa María la Redonda, the place for the entertainment of the city’s criminal underworld, with plenty of cabarets, bars, *pulquerías*, cheap hotels and commercial premises for the practice of prostitution.⁴³ Even though he was good-looking and tended to wear the outfits that characterized pimps, his nickname did not derive from “his always [...] neat appearance,” but from the short form of Francisco [Paco] and from a habit of adding perfume to his cognac and even to his marijuana.⁴⁴ Although Arturo remembers Paco claimed it was the best French perfume available in Mexico, it is likely it was just one of the fragrances he knew how to fabricate, as he stated to authorities in 1938.⁴⁵ More than a simple anecdote, Aldrete Medina’s alias and the flamboyance of his tastes portray a man who aimed to identify himself with international consumer goods, modernity, and middle-class aspirations.

⁴¹ Carlos Medina Caracheo, “El Club de Medianoche...,” 71.

⁴² Nick Trevi, *México en los años 40...*, 95-6. [“unos verdaderos adonis”/ “ser muy buenos padrotes”]

⁴³ The information regarding Aldrete Medina’s age and his hometown was taken from the statement he made before a judge in 1935 when he was accused of theft. Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), Fondo: Tribunal Superior de Justicia del Distrito Federal (hereafter TSJDF), Francisco Aldrete Medina, Robo, Caja: 159, Expediente: 21. According to chronicler Armando Jiménez, in 1951 Santa María la Redonda had an extension of a thousand meters with 44 cabarets, 89 bars, 13 brothels, 58 cheap hotels, 121 commercial premises, 3 dance halls and 6 liquor stores. Armando Jiménez, *Cabarets de Antes y de Ahora en la Ciudad de México* (Mexico: Plaza y Valdés, 1991), 58.

⁴⁴ [su aspecto siempre [...] impecable]

⁴⁵ AGN, TSJDF, Francisco Aldrete Medina, Cohecho, Caja: 3104, Expediente: 530596.

Such ostentation accompanied him until his last days. On October 10th 1943, the news of his death featured on front pages of some newspapers, and the narrative illustrates the fame Aldrete Medina had achieved throughout the decade. According to *El Universal*, although Paco *el elegante* had committed several crimes, he always managed to get away with it.⁴⁶ Fraud, the exploitation of women, drug dealing, “bloody” robberies and several confrontations with the police were part of his criminal record although, according to Arturo, Aldrete Medina’s “unique mastery” was in pickpocketing.⁴⁷ In December of 1935, he and other young men (including Ángel Rubio Armendariz *el colo*, a 23-year-old from Durango) met a man walking along Sol and Zaragoza streets, chatted with him in a friendly manner, said good-bye, and ran off; only then did the man realize they had stolen his wallet. Nevertheless, Aldrete Medina and his accomplices were released after the arrest since their guilt could not be proved.⁴⁸

As stated in a note that appeared one day after his death, Paco *el elegante*’s ability to avoid criminal penalties actually caused the chief of the *Departamento de Prevención Social* (Department of Social Prevention) to accuse him of vagrancy and *mahivencia* (low life) and to order his imprisonment, taking advantage of the presidential reforms to the Criminal Code which included, for the first time (in 1941 and the context of World War II), the crime of social dissolution.⁴⁹ After spending 11 months in prison (where he “had managed to save good money by lending some to inmates and jailers”

⁴⁶ “Murió Paco el Elegante,” in *El Universal*, October 9, 1943, p. 1. [“asaltos ‘sangrientos’/“maestría única”]

⁴⁷ Nick Trevi, *México en los años 40...*, 92.

⁴⁸ AGN, TSJDF, Francisco Aldrete Medina, Robo, Caja: 159, Expediente: 21. It is necessary to conduct a more comprehensive investigation to prove if Rubio Armendariz is the same *colo* that exotic dancer Margo Su mentions in her book *Alta Frivolidad*, a reference that allowed Medina Caracheo to suggest the hypothesis on the identity of this individual. Carlos Medina Caracheo, “El Club de Medianoche...,” 71.

⁴⁹ “Paco el Elegante Murió de una Congestión Visceral,” in *El Universal*, October 10, 1943, p. 1. The crime of social dissolution was introduced in article 145 of the Criminal Code. This reform included punishment for Mexicans and foreigners who altered the public peace and put the nation’s sovereignty at risk. In a moment when Mexican state authoritarianism started to consolidate, this constitutional article was frequently used for punishment, without respecting individual guarantees, particularly towards leaders and members of social movements that opposed the government for several decades. This was not, of course, the case of Francisco Aldrete Medina. Alejandro Rosas, “Resabios del Autoritarismo,” posted on August 31, 2006, <<http://fox.presidencia.gob.mx/mexico/sabiasque/?contenido=26787&imprimir=true>> (accessed March 28, 2014).

combined with the money from the women who worked for him, who “felt deep pleasure and particular honor supporting him”) Aldrete Medina decided to celebrate his freedom and say good-bye to the city by going on a drinking spree with other pimps, with whom he visited cabarets, dance halls and bars in the streets of Santa María la Redonda and its surroundings, drinking *cubaslíbres* and highballs. His companions said that night of excess ended in the house of famous drug dealer Lola *la chata*, on San Ciprián street, where Paco took large amounts of heroin.⁵⁰ Due to his deteriorating condition, one of his party mates claimed to take him to the doctor’s, but Aldrete Medina died on the way to his house, located on República de Cuba street.⁵¹

Suspicion concerning Paco *el elegante’s* cause of death quickly spread. His partner, Carolina Gómez Rizo, went to the third delegation office requesting an investigation be carried out, since she believed Paco’s party mates had poisoned him, to rob him of his belongings. On the night of his death he carried 3000 pesos, fountain pens, a pin with a brilliant-cut diamond, and a golden chain he wore as a bracelet. Another hypothesis was an overdose, which explained why the corpse was taken to Hospital Juárez to conduct the corresponding autopsy “in the middle of a procession of criminals, *viciones [sic]* [drug addicts, particularly heroin addicts], [and] nightlife women who had admired the famous ‘*cinturita de arrabal*.’” The verdict was that Aldrete Medina had died of a “generalized visceral congestion,” so any investigation regarding murder was closed.⁵² Nonetheless, Carolina’s version of murder gained ground in the lower depths. Arturo remembers he was profoundly indignant when he arrived at the funeral and found two of the “authors of such an unspeakable crime” guarding the

⁵⁰ Regarding Lola *la chata*, who was part of Mexico City’s culture and a subject of interest for American and Canadian authorities —and also for writers like William S. Burroughs, who included her in his novels *Junkie* (1953), *The Naked Lunch* (1959), and *Cities of the Red Light* (1981)— see Jorge García Robles, *William S. Burroughs en México 1949-1952* (Mexico: Ediciones del Milenio, 1995); Elaine Carey, “‘Selling is More of Habit than Using’ Narcotraficante Lola la Chata and her Threat to Civilization,” *Journal of Women’s History* 21 (4), 2009: 62-89. About drug trafficking and drug consumption in post-Revolutionary Mexico see Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Yerba, Goma y Polvo. Drogas, Ambientes y Policías en México, 1900-1940* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1999).

⁵¹ “Paco el Elegante Murió de una Congestión Visceral,” in *El Universal*, October 10, 1943, p. 13. [“había logrado juntar buenos ahorros prestando dinero a reclusos y celadores”/“sentían hondo placer y singular honor en mantenerlo”]

⁵² *Ibid.*

coffin.⁵³ Despite the fact that everyone assumed that *el guadalajara* (or *el tapatío*) and Pedro Vallejo Becerra, *el méxico*, had killed Aldrete Medina in complicity with some police agents, nobody caused a scandal. It seemed there was too much confusion, with the emotional impact of the funeral, added to the consumption of alcohol, heroin and marijuana, and the appearance of one of Paco *el elegante*'s lovers, who in the company of prostitutes from Dos de Abril street, shouted that *her* man had been killed.⁵⁴

The narrative concerning Aldrete Medina's last night, as well as his funeral, illustrates not only the popularity, ostentation, and consumer habits that characterized him, but also offers information regarding the map of Mexico City's low depths. The journey that the press describes was set within what city planners called "the tenements horseshoe" [la herradura de tugurios], which surrounded the center of the city. During the 1940s and 1950s this zone accommodated the poorest families, which accounted for the majority of the population that migrated from the countryside. At least until 1945 (during the years Paco *el elegante* lived there), around a third of the city's population were concentrated in that space.⁵⁵ It seems likely that the story that appeared in the papers, and the rumors of his death, spread rapidly due to the well-known places and people. One of these people, Pedro Vallejo Becerra, *el méxico*, appeared in diverse publications, at different moments, for around three decades. Born in Guanajuato, he was about 23 when Aldrete Medina died.⁵⁶ At an early age, probably 15, he started to work as a shoe cleaner boy at *Salón México* (where he must have gotten his nickname), and as soon as he finished cleaning the dancers' shoes, he would occupy a place on the dance floor. There he began to make a living off the prostitution of various women, whose money

⁵³ Nick Trevi, *México en los años 40...*, 108. ["en medio de una procesión de hampones, viciones [sic] [adictos a las drogas, particularmente la heroína], mujeres de la vida nocturna que habían admirado al célebre 'cinturita de arrabal'/'una congestión visceral generalizada'/'autores de tan incalificable crimen"]

⁵⁴ Nick Trevi, *México en los años 40...*, 104-9.

⁵⁵ Ma. Cristina Sánchez-Mejorada Fernández, *Rezagos de la Modernidad. Memorias de una Ciudad Presente* (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2005), 181-6.

⁵⁶ AGN, TSJDF, Pedro Vallejo Becerra, Lenocinio, Caja: 3037, Expediente: 500045.

he would take “by hook or by crook, since he believed that every woman who partied with him or who lied by his side was obliged to give him money.”⁵⁷

Paco *el elegante*'s murder was neither the first nor the last case in which Vallejo Becerra was involved. In 1937, *Detectives* magazine reported the death of a man stabbed by *el méxico* on San Juan de Letrán street. According to the story, the pimp had begun to demand money from one of the women who worked that street, who refused to give it to him. On the night of December 2nd, Vallejo Becerra told Concepción Martínez that he was in urgent need of ten pesos, and as she did not give him the money, he became furious and slapped her on the face. Immediately, a woman who was with Vallejo Becerra started beating Concepción Martínez, and when a passer-by tried to stop the fight between the two women, *el méxico* stabbed him.⁵⁸



Figure 19. Pedro Vallejo Becerra, *el méxico*, was one of the most infamous pimps in Mexico City during the 30's, 40's and 50's. During those years he committed several crimes other than pimping, such as theft and homicide.

AGN, TSJDF, Pedro Vallejo Becerra, Lenocinio, Box: 3037, File: 500045.

In his memoirs Arturo recalls several elements of this story although the plot and the year change. He sets it in 1940, when Becerra's main sex worker worked at cabaret Venus; one early morning, *el méxico* found this woman (known as “la India Bonita,” *the beautiful Indian*) drunk and moneyless, so he, outraged, took her out of the cabaret “beating and kicking her.”⁵⁹ A customer, on

⁵⁷ Nick Trevi, *México en los años 40...*, 80. [por la buena o por la mala, pues él se creía que toda mujer que parrandeaba con él o se acostaba a su lado tenía la obligación de darle dinero]

⁵⁸ L.F. Bustamante, “Asesinado por un Apache.” *Detectives*, VI (277), 1937.

⁵⁹ [a punta de golpes y patadas]

noticing the situation, confronted Vallejo Becerra, who stuck a pen-knife in his chest as an answer.⁶⁰ In both stories, the victim is an inspector from the *Monte de Piedad*, and although Arturo remembers that he was sent to prison (from which he was released, thanks to the money gathered by five or six prostitutes who were still working for him), in *Detectives* it is written that he got away with it; the magazine also takes advantage of the story to criticize overcrowding in the prison.⁶¹ In any case, it is key to notice that in both versions of the story Vallejo Becerra's extreme violence stands out, as well as the relative impunity with which he acted.

Becerra's freedom of action seems to have ended in 1957, when he was sentenced to 33 years imprisonment for having participated in the murder of the priest Juan Fullana Taberner inside a church in the Roma neighborhood. The main culprit in the crime was an ex-professional wrestler known as Pancho Valentino, who had a long criminal background that included theft, battery, rape, pandering, and burglary. In one of his multiple imprisonments he met *el méxico*, with whom he established a close friendship. Another participant in the crime (which had originally been planned as theft) met Vallejo Becerra in a dance contest at *Salón México*, and from then on, they decided to present dance exhibitions together in different places.⁶² News of this case travelled far and fast,

⁶⁰ Nick Trevi, *México en los años 40...*, 101. The "India Bonita" was a beauty contest organized by newspaper *El Universal* in 1921. In 1938, a movie called *La India Bonita* was released; actually, it was about a love story during the contest. The woman who worked for *el méxico* probably got her nickname from that movie. Several investigations have been carried out regarding the contest and its indigenist and nationalist connotations: Rick A. Lopez, "The India Bonita Contest of 1921 and the Ethnicization of National Culture," *Hispanic Historical American Review*, 82 (2), 2002: 291-328; Apen Ruiz, "'La India Bonita': National Beauty in Revolutionary Mexico," *Cultural Dynamics*, 14 (3), 2002: 283-301; Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Estampas de Nacionalismo Popular Mexicano* (Mexico, CIESAS, 1994).

⁶¹ The *Nacional Monte de Piedad* is a loan agency founded in 1775 mainly aimed at the part of the population with the lowest economic resources in Mexico City. Although in other countries these loan agencies have lost ground to savings banks, in Mexico, the *Monte de Piedad* still occupies an important place in Mexican society. It currently has more than 180 branches around the country. María Eugenia Romero Ibarra, "El Monte de Piedad de México: Origen y Desarrollo de la Institución" (Paper presented at the *Congreso Internacional de Historia de las Cajas de Ahorros*, Murcia, Spain, October, 16-18, 2008).

⁶² J.M. Servín, "Pancho Valentino, el Confesor de Curas," in Gerardo Viñas Villadelángel, *El Libro Rojo. II 1928-1959* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012): 341-2.

probably due to the victim's occupation and the destruction of several religious images as they searched for an alleged fortune.

Both men's careers in the criminal underworld, and the moment when their stories overlap, allow the identification of several elements that signified the *good pimp* masculinity in the eyes of men who migrated to the city in those years. Just like the images circulating on cinema screens, the outfits and dancing figured as fundamental characteristics that drew these men into urban spaces through modernity and allowed them to leave their rural past behind; leaving their manual jobs for economic prosperity. With respect to *el México*, Arturo remembers that as soon as he started working as a pimp "he polished his manners and his dressing style."⁶³ As for the pimp's personality: cold blood, the ability to evade punishment from authorities, and violent control over women were essential characteristics that built the stereotype. Thus, their masculinity was based on the possession of material goods and on the control over other men, but mainly women. The latter became their possession and their means of subsistence. As such, they were accessories that elevated the status of the man for whom they worked (the beauty of the women as well as the number controlled were key). Simultaneously, these accessories also offered a way men could gain access to the consumer goods they aspired to, and even a means of rescue when they were arrested by the police. The domination over other men was established through violence or bravado; a full-fledged pimp, or an apprentice, used verbal or physical confrontation to determine the pecking order in the streets or cabarets. Collusion with police and the ability to avoid jail sentences were seen as powers that would permit these men to exercise control over legislation, even from inside prison.

Some of these men, such as Odilón González Ortiz or José Robles Robles (described at the beginning of this section), and even Arturo, went to movie theaters with the money they obtained from prostitution, and on screen saw urban spaces, stereotypes, and situations they were intimately

⁶³ Nick Trevi, *México en los años 40...*, 99. [se fue puliendo en sus modales y en su modo de vestir]

familiar with. One can imagine them waiting for a haircut while looking through a publication, and seeing familiar pimp faces and locations. Of course, not all of them reached the celebrity status of Francisco Aldrete Medina, who was remembered on movie theater marquees nine years after his death with a film named after his alias: 1952's *Paco el elegante*, starring popular actor Antonio Badú.



Figure 20. On January 3rd, 1952 a movie named after one of the most famous pimps was released, in Mexico City. The plot tells the story of Paco and his henchmen, a gang of drug dealers and pimps, after they kill a journalist.

In his memoirs Arturo disregards the film: “everything was a lie [...] [in that story] he is a gangster with cars and guns, they even suggest he was a drug dealer, but those that made the movie were not well documented about Paco’s life [...] I can assure you he never became a gangster nor did he use guns, he only liked to use his knife [...] he was never a gangster!” (Nick Trevi, *México en los años 40...*, 94.

It is interesting to notice that even though cars and machine guns are related to modernity, Arturo considers that using a knife was more “masculine/honorable” (maybe because the fighting skills it requires). As for Paco as pictured as a pimp, Arturo accepts it naturally.

Thus, many men considered pandering a profitable life option, so they adopted it. The verbal, sexual and physical abuse they used to compel women to prostitute themselves was constant. The relative impunity they enjoyed from the eyes of justice looking the other way was not granted to women accused of similar crimes. As discussed in chapter 3, women did not enjoy the same lack of scrutiny from authorities. Many men admired how the pimps obtained the prostitutes’ submission and loyalty which can be understood also as a consequence of the coercion and abuse such women received from the pimps themselves, not to mention the relative normalization of violence against women in Mexico’s everyday life at the time. Judicial processes held against these men point to some clues regarding this normalization.

I'll be eight days in prison, but when I'm out, I'll beat the crap out of you!

Description of the first scenes from the 1948 film *Salón México*: the select group of dancing couples is ready. At the bottom of the dance floor, a neon sign states the special occasion: GREAT DANZÓN CONTEST. As the orchestra plays loudly, a man leans towards the audience in order to tell his accomplice to make sure the judges vote for couple number 13. He promises that those who will not favor him shall be beaten, “but outside.”⁶⁴ While the music plays on, it is possible to appreciate multi-toned patent shoes, and the contoured calves of women dancing in delicate high heels. The piece ends and the audience shout out only one name: “Paco, Paco, Paco!” The main judge then declares dance couple number 13, Mercedes and Paco, the winners. The plan succeeds, and they are awarded a trophy with 500 pesos cash. Both leave the dance floor among the crowd’s cheers. Paco, who is carrying the prize, is followed by desperate Mercedes who reminds him of their deal: she would keep the money, since she needed to pay for her younger sister’s boarding school. Paco replies that if she is in need she should go find some tourists and see if she can steal from them. Arriving at the dancing hall’s main gate, Mercedes pulls his arm to beg for, at least, half the money. He tells her not to bother him anymore or he will beat her right there, and he gets rid of her with a hard push. A still and silent policeman who witnesses the argument catches Mercedes so she does not fall. Paco crosses the street, waits for a prostitute, and they both enter a cheap hotel.

The first five minutes of the 1948 film *Salón México* briefly depict the different types of abuse sex workers endured at the hands of their pimps. Just like other films of the *cabareteras* genre, the prostitutes resigned themselves to such circumstances because of the noble ends they pursue. Ill-treatment is part of their sacrifice, and they go through it largely in public. It is interesting to note that in this movie authorities (in the figure of Lupe López, the honest policeman looking after *Salón México*) do not move a finger to stop pimps, even when they are easily identified, as well as the

⁶⁴ *Salón México*. Directed by Emilio Fernández. Mexico: CLASA Films Mundiales, 1948 [pero afuera]

women they exploit. Despite the 1929 law against living off the prostitution of others “with no legal authorization,” and the 1940 banning of procuring in all its forms, sources indicate that men involved in the business were, apparently, barely affected by the legal measures, in comparison to women.⁶⁵ Initially, as we saw, the main targets for authorities were brothels and call houses, which were managed mostly by madams. These women and their assistants (among whom were some men) were pursued even when there was no criminal complaint from the alleged victims. Nonetheless, the men who directly lived off prostitution (street-walking in particular) never set foot in police stations after several raids were carried out, mainly from 1940 to 1945.⁶⁶

In fact, street prostitution —considered by many madams as disloyal competition before the closure of numerous brothels— increased after the elimination of the zone of tolerance and after the legislative changes of 1940. Although what was prohibited was procuring and not sexual commerce, during the first months police raids were conducted, and street prostitutes were frequently taken to police stations and released after paying a fine. According to some press reports on the situation, the main cause of the raids was the financial benefit for some officials involved. The money obtained from the women never reached the Mexico City treasury [*Tesorería del Distrito Federal*], but remained in the pockets of superior officials.⁶⁷ As mentioned in the previous chapter, a commission of 12 representatives appeared before the chief of metropolitan police, J. Manuel Núñez Muratalla, to charge that the lack of control over all the women working in sexual commerce affected them economically. The official assured he would stop the “razzias” [raids], as he was convinced that since

⁶⁵ Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions. Prostitution, Public Health and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 231-2; “Reformas al Código Penal,” *Boletín de Seguridad e Higiene III*, no. 1 (1940), 231-2.

⁶⁶ This process was explained in full detail in chapter 2.

⁶⁷ Eduardo Delhumeau, “Los Mil y Un Pecados de la Capital. Sálvese quien pueda,” in *La Prensa*, March 19, 1940, pp. 7, 9.

the bail imposed on street prostitutes was covered by their pimps, the freed women would then be billed by the pimps for up to 2 or 3 times the original amount.⁶⁸

In spite of the promises, in the 1940s there were still reports about raids carried out by authorities, as well as exploitation from “young men who dress[ed] smartly,” who acted with full impunity knowing that “the police [could] hardly impede [their] activities.” The lawyers who supported these women lamented that sex workers rarely brought charges against pimps, which meant the pimps were only accused of administrative misdemeanors.⁶⁹ In the late 1940s and early 1950s the situation had not changed for street prostitutes. According to letters sent to the attorney general [*Procurador de Justicia*] and to the secretary general of the president by R. Silva (a physician who worked at the Health Inspection Department and who attended “many public women”), the “razzias” had caused the rise in fees that policemen asked for in order to “turn a blind eye” and let women work on the streets.⁷⁰ The fees were five pesos for policemen and three for the judicial officers who drove the van used during the raids. In case women were caught, they should pay the *granaderos* (riot squad members) 50 pesos, or give them any object of the same (or higher) value, to avoid being taken to the police station. If they ended up at the public prosecutor’s office or in jail, they could only be released on bail ranging from 70 to 300 pesos; otherwise they should stay 15 days in prison, which also implied economic loss.⁷¹

In one of these documents Silva directly questions the prosecutor: “Can you tell me [...] why are ‘little butterflies’ being detained? What is their crime? Being in the street? As far as I know, it is a

⁶⁸ “La Cuestión de la Tolerancia en México,” in *El Nacional*, February 17, 1940, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Felipe Moreno Arizabal, “Una Mafia de Explotadores de Mariposas,” in *Excelsior*, June, 5, 1948, Second Section, p.1. [“jóvenes que v[estían] elegantemente”/ “la policía difícilmente puede obstruir [sus] actividades”]

⁷⁰ [“muchas mujeres públicas”/ “hacerse de la vista gorda”]

⁷¹ “Carta Señor R. Silva al Secretario Particular del Presidente,” 1948, AGN, Fondo: Miguel Alemán Valdés, Caja: 0617 (551.1/57-553/26); “Carta de R. Silva al Procurador,” no date, AGN, Fondo: Miguel Alemán Valdés, Caja: 0617 (551.1/57-553/26), and “Carta sin Firma al Procurador Silva,” no date, AGN, Fondo: Miguel Alemán Valdés, Caja: 0617 (551.1/57-553/26). Despite the fact this last document does not contain a visible signature, the information and the way in which the author presents it allow it to be inferred that the letter is from R. Silva. The non-dated letters were written between 1946 and 1952, when Miguel Alemán Valdés was president of Mexico; probably around 1948, taking the dated document as a basis for the hypothesis.

crime only to ‘encourage prostitution’ not to practice it.” At the end of the document the doctor offers his own hypothesis, assuring that this occurred because these women belonged to lower classes, together with the fact that the business of prostitution was very lucrative, even for the authorities, who would grab women by the dozens “so that it cannot be noticed [how many] are released after paying without receiving a voucher, receipt or something similar.”⁷² Doctor Silva added to these worries the exploitation of pimps, who demanded “between 40 and 50 pesos” from street prostitutes, and asked the officials to “[p]roceed and [to do so] ruthlessly because the police know them all, and among them there are many policemen.”⁷³ The relationship between policemen, officials, and pimps in Mexico City during the first half of the twentieth century was complex. There was place for corruption and complicity. In his memoirs, Arturo states that he had other *malvivientes* as neighbors in the hotel where he lived, as well as a police narcotics agent (who was monitoring the criminal-ridden place, but never arrested or denounced any, and even helped many when they got into trouble), and “a sergeant of the uniformed police who was the one who sold [them] the weed.”⁷⁴

The last months of Paco *el elegante*’s life provide an interesting example of the different nuances in the relationship between pimps and authorities of various levels. According to sources, his last night was the last he planned to spend in the city —due to the constant harassment by the police. Instead, Aldrete Medina and his partner would spend some time in the countryside. However, Arturo remembers that the head of the Secret Service (“commander Galindo, followed by four or five police agents”) appeared at the funeral. On seeing him, several mourners felt fear of being arrested (because of their background and the marijuana they were consuming); nonetheless, the

⁷² “Carta sin Firma al Procurador Silva,” no date, AGN, Fondo: Miguel Alemán Valdés, Caja: 0617 (551.1/57-553/26) [“¿Puede decirme [...] porque se detiene a las ‘mariposillas’? ¿Cuál es su delito? ¿Estar en la calle? Tengo entendido que sólo está penando ‘incitar a la prostitución’ no ejercerla/“para que no se note las que salen pagando sin recibir boleta, recibo o cosa semejante”]

⁷³ “Carta de R. Silva al Procurador,” no date, AGN, Fondo: Miguel Alemán Valdés, Caja: 0617 (551.1/57-553/26) [“entre cuarenta y cincuenta pesos”/ “[p]roceder y despiadadamente porque la policía los conoce a todos y hay entre ellos muchos policías”]

⁷⁴ Nick Trevi, *México en los Años 40...*, 34-5. [“un sargento de la policía uniformada que era quien [les] vendía la hierba”]

commander reassured them that despite the temptation to conduct a legendary raid, he would not do so as it was neither the time nor the moment. “I come to say good-bye to Paco *el elegante*, and that’s all,” he said.⁷⁵ In order to retain him in prison the authorities decided to invoke the crime of social dissolution even while Aldrete Medina had an extensive criminal record, including procuring. This was not a minor decision. If we take into account that, from 1940 to 1945 police raids in brothels and assignation houses caused many of them to disappear or become clandestine, while many madams went through a legal process and were sentenced (taking as evidence the number of bedrooms in a house or the statement of some secret agent); it thus appears relevant that although their activities were well-known, there appears to be no investigation against Paco *el elegante* along these lines.

Unlike madams, who endured legal processes because of their properties or as a result of external complaints, male procurers were generally brought to authorities by their female victims of exploitation, after suffering much physical and verbal abuse under them. In spite of the fact that sex workers used legal complaints —much more frequently since 1946— as a mechanism to defend themselves from pimps, it is highly probable that the fear of reprisals, together with the unwillingness of authorities to notice or charge the men, caused the women to give up during the process. As a consequence, they contributed to a vicious circle, as they did not ratify the complaint, and many of these men were set free. Even though complaints about procuring from 1934 to 1952 had obvious differences, they allow us to establish some generalizations regarding the relation of pimp-street prostitute in those years. They open, for an instant, the door through which the voices of these women can be heard, voices that, from the perspective of some sources (written from the male point of view), granted the pimps special status, or even fostered their behavior. By means of the

⁷⁵ “Murió Paco el Elegante,” in *El Universal*, October 9, 1943, p. 1; “Paco el Elegante Murió de una Congestión Visceral,” in *El Universal*, October 10, 1943, p. 1; Nick Trevi, *México en los Años 40...*, 110. [“comandante Galindo, seguido de cuatro o cinco agentes de la jefatura”/ “ni el lugar ni el momento. Vengo a despedirme de Paco *el elegante* y eso es todo”]

judicial testimonies it is possible to outline the harsh reality in which verbal, sexual and physical abuse played a fundamental role in the alleged submission to or complicity with their pimps.⁷⁶

The majority of women who denounced their pimps lived under the same roof as them. On numerous occasions they declared a bond with these men due to some kind of physical or sentimental relationship. Some lived with their pimp or were married to them, whereas others had been seduced, and, after engaging in sexual relations with the pimp, they were forced into prostitution by their partners. In 1942 a case about an under-aged woman was registered; she claimed she had been kidnapped, sexually abused, and forced to work in front of the hotel where she was kept captive.⁷⁷ In general, the entrapping worked in two different ways: women were approached by some young man in the street or at their working places, and, from that moment, they established some kind of relationship that would result in sexual commerce; another way was when already-working prostitutes met a man involved in this domain, started living with him, and, afterwards he began to demand part of her earnings. In all the cases above, when these women hesitated to prostitute themselves, refused to do what the pimps asked for, or did not cover the fee imposed, they were threatened or beaten with fists or any other object.

Some paradigmatic examples given throughout the period illustrate this dynamic. Guadalupe Rosas Lara de González married Tomás González Arias in 1929 or 1930. He took her to the dance hall *La simer*, where she started working as a prostitute. The moment she refused to give him money, he began to threaten her life. In August 1935, after Tomás beat her inside a car “until blood came out of her mouth,” she decided to denounce him. In 1941, Ernestina González Ávila, a sex worker “with a license from the Public Health Department,” met Ángel Torreblanca Corona, with whom

⁷⁶ The analysis of judicial records on procuring started in 1934, the year which corresponds to the first legal process for this crime located in the *Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México*.

⁷⁷ AHDF, Fondo: *Cárceles*, Section: *Penitenciaria, expedientes de reos, Lenonicio* (1942), Fausto Rangel Luna, Caja: 661, Expediente: 4325.

she started living after he courted her and told her “he wanted to have her as a lover.”⁷⁸ During their four months together, Ángel never gave her money; on the contrary, he started to ask her what she earned. Because of this, Ernestina decided to put an end to the relationship; however, Ángel kept looking for her twenty days after that in order to insult her. During one of these arguments, taking place in the corner of Alfredo Chavero street and Niño Perdido street, Ernestina asked a policeman who was in service in that area to detain Torreblanca, since he was insulting her. Ángel told Ernestina, as he was taken to the police station: “I’ll be eight days in prison, but when I’m out, I’ll beat the crap out of you!”⁷⁹ In 1945, two officers brought Arturo Bravo Serrano before the authorities for beating Carmen Pacheco Flores. Both had been living together for around six months, and from the very beginning, Arturo demanded 50 pesos from Carmen daily. As she was “ashamed” of working on the streets, she started to prostitute herself in the cabaret *Waikiki*. Arturo beat her whenever she did not bring the amount required. When Carmen wanted to separate from Bravo Serrano, he threatened to “destroy her face if she did.” The night he was arrested, Arturo beat Carmen because she had arrived home “with only 30 pesos.” The fight must have grown out of proportion, since some neighbors called the police, and even the officers who arrived were hit and insulted by Arturo.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ [“hasta arrojar sangre de la boca”/ “con licencia del Departamento de Salud Pública”/ “la quería tener de querida”]

⁷⁹ [quedaré ocho días en la cárcel, pero cuando salga te voy a dar en toda la madre]

⁸⁰ AHDF, Fondo: *Cárceles*, Section: *Penitenciaría, expedientes de reos, Lenoncio* (1935), Tomás González Arias, Caja: 273, Expediente: 4604; (1941) Ángel Corona Torreblanca, Caja: 602, Expediente: 6030; (1945) Arturo Bravo Serrano, Caja: 859, Expediente: 795. [“apenó”/ “desbaratarle la cara si lo hacía”/ “con únicamente 30 pesos”]



Figure 21. During the first half of the twentieth century, sex workers in Mexico City faced violence and coercion in their daily lives. Even though, sometimes, they tried to protect themselves bringing their pimps to justice, most of the time authorities did not dictate exemplary sentences. In other cases, prostitutes themselves retracted their accusations, thus the violent cycle continued. *Prostituta Herida del Brazo Izquierdo* (Prostitute with left arm injured), Fototeca Nacional, Archivo Casasola, Mexico City, Número de Inventario 73942, ca. 1925-1930.

Unlike the majority of women accused of procuring in those years—who were brought before authorities only for committing that crime—men, in general, were involved in other offences such as assault, battery, theft, kidnapping, and even homicide. The declarations of victims, witnesses, and some police officers illustrate the different forms of violence that pimps used to maintain their power over sex workers. Thus, many of these women had wounds or scars caused by belts, brass knuckles or different sharp weapons, and, although beating with hands was a more frequent practice,

it was no less harmful. There are records, at least, of two cases of death caused by beating.⁸¹ Sometimes pimps were also involved in violent acts inside prison; such is the case of Raúl Bermúdez Aguilar, who, while serving a four-month sentence in 1950 for procuring, together with three comrades, sexually abused another inmate. Perhaps more common were other cases like Rodolfo García Guzmán's, who in a fight on May 2nd, 1952, wounded another prisoner in the chest, hands and head with a weapon made "of bone."⁸²

Despite the frequency and severity of many of the wounds, it can be disconcerting that on several occasions the accused did not deny the facts and even justified them. Arguing that they had lost their patience because of the behavior of the women they lived with, they confessed, somehow naturally, the reasons that led them to hurt the women. The officials reproduced some of the pimps' declarations in the procedure acts: "[he] found Victoria lying [in bed...], and she had not prepared any meal, which made him angry; he urged her to get up, and immediately beat her four or five times with the belt he [usually] wears"; "it is true that sometimes [...] he hit García López, but this was because she disrespected him, and not because she did not give him money"; "Concepción disobeyed him when she left the Hotel, he took off his belt and beat her"; "he does not demand

⁸¹ AHDF, Fondo: *Cárceles*, Section: *Penitenciaría, expedientes de reos, Lenonicio* (1936), Carlos Hernández Estrada, Caja: 319, Expediente: 4416; José Robles Robles, Caja: 350, Expediente: 2368; (1937) Cruz Quiñones Rocha, Caja: 379, Expediente: 6922; (1938) Carlos Gutiérrez Mena, Caja: 439, Expediente: 7101; (1950) Pedro Márquez Aguilar, Caja: 1310, Expediente: 4867. The victims of homicide were María Teresa Galindo, a woman who died of a beating received from Manuel Campos Castorena and his accomplice, Norma Sánchez Ramírez. Manuel's wife, María Luisa Rodríguez Cano, declared against him and assured that "she was also beaten by Manuel to force her to trade her body [for money]." Although the second case was classified under the year 1950 because of Alfredo Lona Cabrera's records for robbery—he was then 23 years old—it belongs to 1976, the year when Alfredo beat the son he had with María de la Luz Cabrera to death. She was dedicated to sexual commerce and was in charge of the household expenses. Alfredo Lona hit the baby, six months old, for crying at five in the morning. AHDF, Fondo: *Cárceles*, Section: *Penitenciaría, expedientes de reos, Lenonicio* (1944), Manuel Campos Castorena aka "El Copetes," Caja: 811, Expediente: 3910 and (1950) Alfredo Lona Cabrera, Caja: 1303, Expediente: 3472.

⁸² AHDF, Fondo: *Cárceles*, Section: *Penitenciaría, expedientes de reos, Lenonicio* (1950), Raúl Bermúdez Aguilar, Caja: 1347, Expediente: 12627 and (1952) García Guzmán Rodolfo, Caja: 1426, Expediente: 1752. [de hueso]

money of her in spite of knowing Leonor is a whore; [...] he has sometimes beaten her and [...] now he hit her because she demanded money of him that he could not possibly obtain.”⁸³

Even more disconcerting are the arguments given by some judges to explain their reasons for absolving the men accused of procuring or for imposing reduced sentences. Sometimes the sex workers' legal complaints lost ground when the corresponding authorities considered, for example, that the declarations from one woman “[who had been] beaten [...] and therefore [was] resentful, lose the little value they might have since they do not count on the support from the witness”; or that “the guilt of the accused was not proved, since, although it is true that in his first declaration it was stated that [...] he beat her, such phrase is rather confusing”; or “that this is about a humble individual from town [...] who got up to sixth grade of elementary school, and [...] therefore, he does not have the culture to know the legality of the act he knew [...] they believe it is equitable to impose him a six-month jail sentence.”⁸⁴

Normalization of the violence sex workers suffered at the hands of their pimps, and the little protection they received from authorities was the result of diverse social, cultural and legal factors. The intrinsic relation between violence and manliness in those years influenced the physical consequences of legal complaints and the way authorities interpreted offences committed by pimps

⁸³ AHDF, Fondo: *Cárceles*, Section: *Penitenciaria, expedientes de reos, Lenonicio* (1936) Carlos Estrada Hernández, Caja: 319, Expediente: 4416; (1938) Valente Acosta Romero, Caja: 398, Expediente: 733; (1942), Caja: 661, Expediente: 4325; and (1944) José Guadalupe Serrano Flores, Caja: 847, Expediente: 9477. [“encontró acostada a Victoria [...] y ésta no había preparado nada para comer, ello le dio coraje, la obligó a que se levantara, y en seguida le pegó cuatro o cinco golpes con el cinturón que usa”/“es cierto que en algunas veces [...] le pegó a la García López, pero esto fue porque ella le faltaba [el respeto], y no porque no le daba el dinero”/“Concepción lo desobedeció por haberse salido del Hotel, se quitó el cinturón y le dio varios golpes”/ “no le exige dinero a pesar de que sabe que Leonor es ramera; que algunas veces la ha golpeado y que ahora la golpeó porque ella le exigía dinero que no podía conseguir”]

⁸⁴ AHDF, Fondo: *Cárceles*, Section: *Penitenciaria, expedientes de reos, Lenonicio* (1941) Francisco Briseño Sandoval, Caja: 623, Expediente: 9235; (1944) José de Jesús Pérez Santos, Caja: 820, Expediente: 5279; (1947) Fernando Gómez Jiménez, Caja: 1037, Expediente: 55227. [“golpeada [...] y por lo tanto resentida, pierde[n] el poco valor que puede tener al faltarle el apoyo de la testigo”/“no se comprobó la culpabilidad penal del procesado, pues si bien es cierto que en su primera declaración se asentó que [...] le propinó un golpe, tal frase es un tanto confusa”/“los jueces [...] teniendo en cuenta que se trata de un individuo humilde del pueblo [...] que cursó hasta el sexto año de primaria y [...] por lo tanto no tiene la cultura para conocer toda la licitud del hecho que conoció [...] creen equitativo imponerle seis meses de prisión”]

—considered as domestic issues or fights between private parties. Sentences had a different effect when imposed on madams, whose brothels were considered harmful for society and the nation.

The testimonies gathered by American anthropologist Oscar Lewis for his study on the culture of poverty in Mexico City in the 1950s reveal the central role of physical and verbal violence in the daily life of the dwellers of *vecindades* [tenements] in the city.⁸⁵ The relation between violence, sexual commerce and masculinity is clear in the testimony of Manuel Sánchez, first-born son of the family interviewed by Lewis. In the 1940s, Manuel was an adolescent that learned many of the cultural codes related to gender and sexuality through his friends. One of them, an agile and handsome dancer called *el rata* [“the rat”], wanted to teach him to be a pimp, and explained to him the entrapping method: meet a girl, court her, have sexual relations with her, and finally, have her working in a cabaret. His friends, some older, had questioned his virility since he rejected, at 13, losing his virginity with the prostitutes they regularly visited for fear of catching some venereal disease: “well, [...] are you a faggot or what? Right now we’re gonna pay for a *vieja* and you’re gonna fuck her,” the older guys replied.⁸⁶ As a consequence, he gave in to the pressure and had his first sexual experience with a prostitute while his friends watched: “well, then that thing happened and the boys came out, very happy to see that I liked *viejás*, and they believed I did not.”⁸⁷ Also through the friendship relations with other young men Manuel fully realized that physical violence was a pillar of virility and of the respect a man could earn in the streets of the city: “the Mexican —and I think that everywhere in the world— really admire the ‘balls’, as we say here. A guy who arrives [at a place]

⁸⁵ “*Barrio* and *vecindad* have no direct translation. A *barrio* is more than a neighborhood. It is a collection of neighborhoods, like the developments of a modern city, but it is not a development. It is more in the tradition of the French *quartier*, in which the common traits defining the place and distinguishing it from others come from the inside, from the soul of the *barrio*, and not from the frontiers established by developers or officials. *Vecindad* is a kind of neighborhood, not defined by the mere vicinity of the houses but by the kind of conviviality existing among the neighbors who happen to live there,” taken from Gustavo Esteva, “Tepito: No Thanks, First World,” <<http://www.context.org/iclib/ic30/esteva/>>, accessed April 25, 2014.

⁸⁶ *Vieja*: colloquial, usually derogatory way of calling a woman. [bueno, [...] tú eres joto o qué cosa? Ahorita te vamos a pagar una vieja y te la vas a coger]

⁸⁷ Oscar Lewis, *Los Hijos de Sánchez. Autobiografía de una Familia Mexicana* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1968), 37-40. [bueno, pues pasó aquella cosa y los muchachos salieron muy contentos de que a mí me gustaban las viejas y ellos creían que no]

kicking, delivering blows, not even seeing who to, is a guy who ‘rocks’, is a guy who has ‘balls.’ If you get the biggest, toughest one, even risking getting a brutal beating, you are respected because you had the courage to face him.”⁸⁸ These social regulations for masculinity worked for Arturo when he met Paco *el elegante*. In his memoirs, Arturo recalls that in their first encounter with the pimp, he faced him because *el elegante* wanted to keep the money Arturo won in a game of dominoes: “Paquito, forgive me, I know who you are, but I have won this game and this is my money,” he told him. Although the situation turned tense, Paco defused the moment by replying: “That’s the way I like *little* men, who do not allow anybody to dazzle them, and although you are too young you have your *little* balls [...] but beware now on, because if I did not stick you [with a knife], another one [...] might as well do so. I like you for being a *little* macho and the only thing I ask from you is to buy me a cup of cognac, since only a few can say they’ve defeated Paco *el elegante* in a game of dominoes.”⁸⁹

In this context, sex workers’ physical and sexual submission must have been interpreted as a natural extension of the dominance a man could exert through violence. Even though pimps established sentimental relationships with some of the prostitutes working for them, the women were regarded as a means of earning money and recognition, more than life or business partners. Additionally, if the prostitutes did not fulfill the pimps’ expectations, they were punished. There were also repercussions in the legal processes sometimes initiated against them: on numerous occasions the accused were released due to a “lack of merits,” [falta de méritos] that is, a verdict that neither affirms nor denies the existence of the crime, but allows the individual to stay out of prison, in case the process continues. On other occasions, the accused was set free “thanks to the victim’s

⁸⁸ Oscar Lewis, *Los Hijos de Sánchez...*, 36. [el mexicano -y yo creo que en todas partes del mundo- admira mucho los ‘güevos’, como así decimos. Un tipo que llega aventando patadas, aventando trompones, sin fijarse ni a quien, es un tipo que ‘se la sabe rifar’, es un tipo que tiene ‘güevos’. Si uno agarra al más grande, al más fuerte, aun a costa de que le ponga a uno una patiza de perro, le respetan a uno porque tuvo el valor de enfrentarlo]

⁸⁹ Nick Trevi, *México en los Años 40...*, 89-90. [“Paquito, me perdonas, yo sé quién eres tú, pero yo he ganado este juego y este dinero es mío”/“Así me gustan los hombrecitos, que no se dejen apantallar de nadie y aunque eres muy chavo ya tienes tus güevitos [...] pero ten mucho cuidado en lo sucesivo, porque si yo no te piqué, otro sí [...] puede hacerlo. Tú me has caído bien por machito y lo único que te pido es que me invites un cognac ya que pocos pueden decir que le ganaron al dominó a Paco *el elegante*”]

forgiveness,” [por perdón de la ofendida] with some sex workers retracting their accusations of exploitation, assuring that their partners simply lost control due to their jealousy and/or alcohol drinking (that he, she, or both had consumed). Other times, neither the women nor the witnesses, nor any police officers, showed up to ratify the legal complaint.⁹⁰ Although there were some cases in which the accused were sentenced to prison for procuring and/or for some other violent crimes, in general, the men managed to get out of jail with relative ease due to the short sentences or because they were released on bail.

Following the evidence, it can be suggested that 1940’s legislative changes, which condemned any form of procuring, slightly affected the men who managed the earnings of street prostitutes. According to judicial cases from the mid-1940s to early 1950s, the only change that starts to appear is the use of the “working man” argument to defend pimps from accusations of procuring. Nevertheless, throughout the 1930s and up to the late 1940s, many procurers admitted openly or in a veiled way that they lived off the earnings their partners obtained from prostitution, either permanently or temporarily. As pimps and prostitutes involved in some cases were married or lived together, it is likely that the judges considered beatings, threats and even procuring as crimes related to domestic life; simply arguments between partners, in which the sex worker had agreed, *naturally* or somehow willingly, to work for her pimp. As a consequence, the accusations of exploitation were dismissed.

The filmgoers who saw 1948’s *Salón México* were familiar with these social and cultural codes. That is why for them it must have seemed congruent that the only way officer Lupe López (in love with Mercedes) managed to face Mercedes’ exploiter was as a citizen. After Paco finds out that Mercedes has stolen the money they won together at the danzón contest, he looks for her at the

⁹⁰ AHDF, Fondo: *Cárceles*, Section: *Penitenciaría, expedientes de reos, Lenoncio* (1941) Francisco Briseño Sandoval, Caja: 623, Expediente: 9235; (1944) Héctor Villalobos Fuentes, Caja: 840 Expediente: 8264; (1944) José Guadalupe Serrano Flores, Caja: 847, Fie: 9477; (1947) Fernando Jiménez Gómez, Caja: 1037, Expediente: 5227.

cabaret and takes her to a nearby hotel to beat her badly. Officer López realizes the pimp's plans, and enters the hotel room to stop him. He offers Mercedes a handkerchief so she can clean her wounds, asks her to wait for him outside, and starts to take off his uniform, while he says: "Come on, hit a man!" Paco replies: "now you want whipping and you give me no guarantees, put on your uniform as it's right and give me guarantees that I'm the civil part!"⁹¹ As he has defeated Mercedes' pimp, Lupe López manages to keep the pimp away from her for a while; however, he does not succeed in rescuing her completely. At the end of the film Mercedes stabs Paco to death as he shoots killing her.

Conclusion

The years of the golden age of Mexican cinema (1935-1955) coincide with the great processes that changed the dimensions, urban landscape, social composition, and therefore, daily life in Mexico City; one of these big processes was migration. The men and women who, in vast numbers, came to the capital city from the provinces integrated into a lifestyle shaped by urbanization and modernity. Simultaneously, they brought with them customs rooted in tradition and life in rancherías, villages, and small towns. Within this context, mass media, radio, magazines, and, of course, the cinema, interacted with city inhabitants as these people actually influenced the images and the news circulating in the media. According to Carlos Monsiváis, one of the most important chroniclers of Mexico City, in those years the audience adopted ways of speaking, gestures, respect towards institutions, and even the perception of duty as well as of pleasure in their daily routine. For Monsiváis these decades were "in fact [...] a 'golden age' not for the cinema but for the public, who,

⁹¹ *Salón México*. Directed by Emilio Fernández. Mexico: CLASA Films Mundiales, 1948 ["¡ahora pégueme a un hombre!"/"conque ahora quiere riatazos y no me da garantías ¡póngase el uniforme como debe y déme garantías que yo soy la parte civil!"]

among other assumptions, trusted that its idols would explain how to survive a bewildering age of modernisation.”⁹²

For some immigrants, characters like the ones described at the beginning of this chapter might have represented those idols. Honest Pepe *el toro* as well as unscrupulous *suavecito*, although at opposite spectrums of desirable masculinity, had features which allowed them to apprehend modernity, incorporate into it and experiment with it. Though criticized, the pimps’ lifestyle was also readily accepted inside and outside the media due to their ostentation, their skill at social climbing, as well as of a perception —although inexact— that women somehow accepted their exploitation.

From the beginning of the twentieth century pimps played a central role in the administration of street sexual commerce in the city. Such predominance became patent not only in the images spread through the media, but was also part of the city’s social and cultural life. In the nightclubs and in the main streets the pimps showed their outfits, their dancing skills, the women they could control, as well as numerous violent displays to maintain dominance. Some of them even acquired enough reputation (though not the best kind) to appear in magazines and newspapers that reported their crimes with a certain regularity. Despite exhibiting a behavior considered immoral, pimps had admiration from many men who aspired to be like them due to their modern lifestyle seeming more profitable than that of a factory or manual worker. Rather than venture a hypothesis on the influence of the cinema upon reality or vice versa, this research aims to show the circulation of the socio-cultural elements that enabled the continuity and further preeminence of pimps in the management of sexual commerce in the country’s capital.

In 1940, when the state started an intensive campaign against city brothels to combat procuring, it mainly focused on the closure of premises where prostitution was practiced, that had been registered during the time prostitution was regulated. Brothels were regarded as synonymous with

⁹² Carlos Monsiváis, “Mythologies”..., 117.

exploitation, and, as such, they were the main targets for authorities. As a consequence of the closure of those premises, sexual commerce increased in the streets, bars, cabarets and clandestine brothels, and because the police raids mainly affected madams and prostitutes, pimps found a favorable environment for their rise. Corruption, impunity, and differential action of justice added to the experience these men had in the control of street prostitution, which permitted less severe punishment for pimps than for madams: the latter established their power in places which were combated by authorities, whereas pimps strengthened their dominance through the control of women unprotected by justice. Additionally, in order to initiate a judicial process against pimps, an official legal complaint was an indispensable requirement. Nevertheless, a key element in the relation of pimp-prostitute —violence— caused sex workers, fearful of reprisals, to retract their accusations or abandon the process, which allowed pimps to mostly avoid prison or to be released immediately. The combination of these factors permitted the strengthening of the pimps' *modus operandi*, consolidating their dominance in those years, through coercion, impunity, and complicity networks, which paradoxically favored them when the authorities decided to fight procuring in Mexico City.

Conclusion

For over a decade, sex workers of La Merced neighborhood have held public demonstrations to remember their coworkers on the Day of the Dead. They build big shrines [ofrendas] on the streets where they work, and as tradition requires, they fill the shrines with flowers, candles, skulls made of sugar, food, and even alcoholic beverages. Still, sex workers' shrines are not conventional. These women also offer condoms, earrings, high heels, and beauty products to the memory of their workmates, represented in doll form —mainly Barbie imitations— dressed with brightly colored skimpy clothes. Sex workers also celebrate a special mass in the Soledad church [la iglesia de la Soledad], wearing skull masks and similarly colored clothes.

During the last few years, several Day of the Dead commemorations have become a form of social protest against those who have died or disappeared due to increasing violence in Mexico. Sex workers in the historic center of Mexico City and its surrounding streets share this social experience. Women (both cis women and trans women) pay tribute to their colleagues who have been murdered or to those who have died from physical abuse in their daily lives. The shrines they build, as well as the walk from the church to the streets they work, are meant to ask respect for their occupation, and to demand security and justice.

La Merced is one of the oldest neighborhoods of the city. Its streets, located in the center's southeast area, have been associated with commercial activities since the Aztec era. For decades, its residents have dealt with poverty, crime, and prostitution. Recently, groups against human trafficking have brought attention to cases of forced prostitution downtown. In 2012 the local Women's Institute joined efforts with the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women and Girls in Latin America and the Caribbean (CATWLAC) in order to present an assessment of the structural causes of sexual exploitation in Mexico City and a plan of action. According to their numbers, 99% of

women that worked in central areas like la Merced were exploited by criminal organizations.¹ This high percentage is in part explained by the fact that CATWLAC is against prostitution of any kind. As mentioned in the introduction, this organization considers the sex trade a form of violence against women which should be eradicated. Sex workers have protested against this statistic and the measures taken by the government as a result, such as raids and group arrests. Unfortunately, the undeniable horror lived by the victims of forced prostitution is not only casting a shadow on the incipient activism of sex workers, but also putting at risk the goal that one day they could be fully considered as laborers with rights. There are signs hanging on Day of the Dead shrines where it can be read, for instance: “Stop saying we are part of criminal organizations. We are an organized group and we demand respect.”²



Figure 22. *Procesión de la Plaza de la Soledad*. Procession in La Soledad Square. Santos Moreno Gil, 2011.

¹ CATWLAC-InMujeresDF, *Diagnóstico de Causas Estructurales y Sociales de la Trata de Personas en la Ciudad de México* (Mexico, 2012), p. 81.

² On the Internet there are several images of the shrines in la Merced. Most of them belong to the photographic agency Cuartoscuro. <http://agencia.cuartoscuro.com/agencia/> (accessed January 1, 2015). [Basta de decir que somos parte de la delincuencia organizada. Somos un grupo organizado y exigimos respeto]



Figure 23. *Ofrenda Sexoservidoras en la Merced*. Sex Workers' Shrine in La Merced, 2013, Enrique Ordoñez. Agencia Cuartoscuro. Cuartoscuro.com

The current tension between policymakers and sex workers, as well as the relation between urban dwellers and commercial sex is a part of a long story. This dissertation has shown that the 1940s marked a turning point in the organization of the sex trade in the capital city. Since the nineteenth century, authorities considered the control of prostitution as a matter of public health. For doctors in the Porfirian era, prostitutes belonged on the lowest scale of social evolution, and their condition condemned them to live as socially infected beings. With prostitution considered the main vehicle for the transmission of venereal disease, the enrolment, inspection, and incarceration of ill prostitutes was seen by authorities as the best way to contain the spread of syphilis. In an essay that supported this perspective, doctor Luis Lara y Pardo provided evidence of the long relationship between sex workers and the church they visit today to pay tribute to their coworkers: “slaves of

superstition [prostitutes] consider as one of their main duties to visit the Soledad church on certain days, [this church] has the sad privilege of housing the invocations of lost people.”³

La Soledad church is not the only enduring legacy of past sex trade. Like today, at the turn of the twentieth century discussions over the control of prostitution or its revocation derived their main arguments from international debates of the matter. Politicians, doctors, and policymakers in Mexico cited European measures, feminists’ names, and debates taking place in England, France, or Spain about the utility or failure of state regulated prostitution. However, they did not see these ideas as a way to “liberate” prostitutes, but as discussions over individual and collective rights. After 1910, the Mexican revolution empowered new social actors and provided new rhetoric and means of negotiation. Prostitutes were considered the daughters of workers or peasants that had been oppressed by the dictatorship. The revolutionary government did not abolish regulated prostitution during the three first decades of the new regime, but highlighted the role labor could have in the social rehabilitation of sex workers.

During the years of state-sponsored prostitution, madames played a central role as the link between prostitutes in bordellos or call houses, and the authorities, whether they be doctors, policemen, or Health Office inspectors. Authorities constantly overlooked men. Each group responded to different circumstances, but clients, pimps, or male prostitutes were not subjects of the laws that regulated commercial sex in the city. The public face of prostitution from 1863 to 1940 was mainly female. Independent prostitutes worked in the tolerance zone downtown occupying certain streets specifically devoted to commercial sex. Brothels of several categories were concentrated in two main areas: the center of the city and Roma neighborhood. The map of

³ Luis Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución en México* (Mexico: Librería de la Viuda de Ch. Bouret, 1908), 147. [son esclavas de toda superstición. Consideran como uno de sus principales deberes el de concurrir en determinados días a la Iglesia de la Soledad que tiene el triste privilegio del patronato de la gente perdida]. Luz María Ortega, my aunt’s mother, lived near la Merced in the early 1950’s. She mentioned to me on several occasions that in those times it was well known that prostitutes and thieves visited the church, praying to not be arrested by the police.

commercial sex was not uniform. The dynamics of prostitution, as well as the relationship of urban dwellers with madames and prostitutes, was diverse. The second chapter of this dissertation showed that the different spaces for prostitution in the city, ranging from cheap hotels to first class bordellos, shared certain dynamics, but at the same time had their own peculiarities. Thus, this dissertation suggests looking at sex work as a multifaceted activity whose regulations differently affected independent prostitutes that sold their services for little money, hoteliers, or sex workers in high class brothels, to name a few categories.

By 1940, the revolutionary government was experiencing a new stage. The beginning of the age of institutions meant that the armed phase of the civil war had finished to make way for the consolidation of the state. In this process, international recognition and the support of union-organized workers, peasants, and umbrella groups were crucial. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1938 meant the opportunity to show the world the stability of the country, and its strength as part of international power negotiations. Mexico joined the League of Nations in 1931, and during the following years signed international agreements, and adopted some of the League's resolutions. In relation to the sex trade, this meant embracing one of the main resolutions the League proposed to combat women's trafficking: the abolition of regulated prostitution and the prohibition of brothels.

During the same time, Mexico City experienced an accelerated spatial growth triggered, in part, by the massive migration from the countryside. The capital offered a modern style of life and job opportunities, but at the same time, the buildings in the city center could not house the vast numbers of migrants that arrived every day. Well-off families moved to other areas, but the main square and nearby streets still contained an important part of the cultural and artistic life of the city. Commercial sex was an essential component of the entertainment life of the city both in prosperous and humble urban areas.

Local and international renegotiations of power had an impact on different realms of city life. Commercial sex was not an exception, as it embodied struggles over spaces, national security, morality, and urban renovation. Backed by the resolutions of the League of Nations, city authorities abolished laws that controlled prostitution and targeted brothels and their owners or managers, mostly women. During the first years, madames sought to protect their businesses using legal actions that they and their lawyers had used before. None of them were effective. Brothels were seen as places for exploitation or dens of seditious activities. Regularly, sex workers testified in favor of madames, however, judges did not absolve the accused on the basis of those declarations. National rhetoric based on the revolution's ideals played an important role in the strategies madames used to protect themselves and their brothels. Letters full of revolutionary language or injunction petitions were written by brothel-keepers of different social classes. A group of high-class madames even tried to form a union, with the advice of experienced politicians. All of these attempts failed. The state had categorized procuring/pimping as a crime. Madames would not be considered workers because from 1940 onwards, their activity was a criminal offense.

During the same years, independent sex workers in the tolerance zone also experienced crucial changes that affected their work environment. Prostitution was not considered a crime; however, the streets they occupied were demolished in order to open new roads and avenues. These women also organized themselves to defend what they called their right to earn a living [el derecho de ganarse la vida]. Through legal procedures and public manifestations, independent prostitutes tried to revoke federal measures, but one more time, public well-being (often described in moral terms) succeeded over their petitions. They did not completely abandon the area they used to work in, but the one-room places they occupied eventually disappeared.

As a result of the combination of these factors, prostitution went underground and began to benefit men. A handful of skillful madames used their personal connections with politicians, judges,

or police chiefs to operate as they did before, but now paying more generous bribes than they had under regulated prostitution. Corruption played an important role in the increase of male power. Cops and low-ranked authorities extorted owners of clandestine brothels and streetwalkers alike. Even when prostitution was not prohibited, police officers threatened sex workers and profited from them. With the closure of brothels, hotel owners —a group mainly formed by men— gained terrain in the sex trade because they were not targeted the same way as brothels. The end of state-regulated prostitution paved the way for the transition from madames to pimps as the major administrators of sex workers' earnings. Authorities continued ignoring men's role as procurers. By no means were pimps ever part of massive arrests or accusations by undercover agents, as madames were. Madames were accused by the state whereas sex workers were the only ones to accuse pimps. Frequently, judges freed these men of charges and pimps continued operating, using violence as a hallmark of their influence over prostitutes.

Violence, crime, immorality, and vice were some of the major themes in Mexico City's underworld. However, that is not the only way city dwellers and tourists perceived it. Madames, pimps, and sex workers formed part of the popular culture of the time. They gained a certain notoriety in magazines and newspapers, and artists represented them in songs, movies, and literature. Prostitution's contested nature and contradictory dynamics open spaces for a wide array of experiences and perceptions. For example, authorities dismantled the regulation system under the premise that their actions will combat exploitation suffered by the daughters of the people [*las hijas del pueblo*] at the hands of brothel-keepers. For their part, sex workers often complained about the abuses suffered under the French System, but at the hands of inspectors from the Health Office. In fact, the banning of brothels resulted in a lack of protection for sex workers, even when they lived under a contract of financial exploitation. Prostitutes rejected some rules of this scheme, but were not entirely in favor of its abolition.

Authorities and policymakers did not hear the voices of prostitutes that supported madames, asked for the permanence of brothels, or for the delimitation of a tolerance zone suitable to their needs. Judges discredited numerous cases against pimps due to a perceived normalization of violence against women at that time. Madames failed in incorporating themselves before the revolutionary state as entrepreneurs. The rules set by the government that arose from the Mexican revolution disempowered women involved in the sex trade by eliminating their legal mechanisms of negotiation, ignoring their demands, and moving them underground. As a result, extortion, corruption, and violence became the norm.

Nowadays, sex workers of Mexico City are still looking for labor recognition. They face violent abuses at the hands of pimps, cops, and clients. They still can be found working in hotels. They also continue paying money regularly to men such as policemen or pimps to buy their security. The debates over forced prostitution, human trafficking, and sex work as a chosen way of life continue. Public manifestations, such as the shrines sex workers build to commemorate the Day of the Dead, are a reminder that their voices have to be heard when regulating their activities. During the first half of the twentieth century, society, policymakers, and local and federal authorities considered male prostitution non-existent and female prostitutes as degenerate beings, victims, or criminals. As a result, their agency was overlooked, and their way of making a living was criminalized. These consequences, and the stigma that has accompanied prostitution in different eras and places, still stand in the way of labor recognition, respect, and security for sex workers in Mexico City today.

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