

Prostitution in Creole Societies

Prostitution is defined by the Larousse Dictionary as “the practice by someone who consents to have recurring sexual relationships with an undetermined number of partners in exchange for money.” However, the question of remuneration for this work is not associated with a normal understanding of payment for a completed task but depends on socio-economic factors: “due to the global economic crisis, students, housewives and unemployed women have turned more and more to prostitution, on an occasional or a long term basis, so as to supplement their income and attempt to escape their precarious economic situation” (*Fondation Scelles*, 2013). In societies whose GDP (Gross Domestic Product) is at least 30% below the GDP of large metropolises and where the unemployment rate reaches 26%, the economic crisis is likely to have a much more serious impact with regards to prostitution rates.

When studying prostitution in Creole societies, it is important to understand the origins of the society with the arrival of soldiers, relationships with the Amerindians and, of course, the slave trade. The latter point is still in dispute insofar as many writers, whether of Creole origin or not, consider that the slave trade represents the beginning of Creole societies since it is associated, as René Girard put it, with “original violence,” which participates in the initial construction of all people and all nations. Edouard Glissant tells us: “If it is possible to say so, the people of the plantations knew a lot about travelling. In the ship they embarked on a great trip, all of them had faced the unknown without being aware of it, or wishing to forget it as fast as possible(...) the humble ship is a symbolic womb. The matrix abyss(...) Indeed, if you are facing fear on your own then you are already sharing the unknown with some others who you have not met yet” (*Glissant*, 1997). Such a conception might lead one to forget that the mixing of cultures and interbreeding created cultural wealth, in and of itself, and this is the foundation of the broad web of peoples that has been slowly developed day after day. That’s why it seems impossible today to trace back the origin of each individual human being in these territories. It is, however, rather paradoxically, also a shared element of all the peoples who arrived on these lands from the Americas and from the Indian or Pacific Oceans. In effect, to use a quote from *In Praise of Creoleness*, Creoles define themselves as “neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians; we declare we are Creoles. It will be an inner attitude, a watch or, even better, a kind of mental envelope for the core from which our world will arise in full consciousness of the world” (*Barnabé, Chamoiseau, Confiant*, 1997). So as to strengthen this argument, we shall mention again Edouard Glissant’s words on the rhizome identity, “whereas the ‘grassroots identity’ descends from the ancestors, the ‘rhizome identity’ is being built in the present. It has neither an original place, nor a precise family history; it is born from the relations it is creating” (*Glissant*, 1997). This point serves as a starting point of analysis as, directly related to the question of the slave trade, are also the questions of

exploitation of persons, by other persons and, in particular, violence against women. This has led to the particular aspect of the man-woman relationship that is highlighted in the “Psychology of Creole Societies.” In effect, “the notion of Creole family and literature is closely related to slavery and, as a consequence, the construction of the family is often dated back to 1848, the date of the abolition of slavery. Not that the family did not exist before, but the slave status and the children’s attachment to the mother (more precisely to the mother’s household), such as it is described in the 12th and 13th articles of the Black Code, did not allow women to build a family, nor to consider the family as a matriarchal or, more precisely, as womb focused, such as it had been described by Jacques André” (*Nuissier*, 2013). The link between slavery and prostitution has been established by Wijers and Lap-Chew who write that: “If you assume that prostitution is a slavery in itself, prostitution and slavery then share a common essence. Any other analysis outside this logic is consequently impossible. It is sometimes even forbidden; some people tried to analyze the phenomenon through another approach and were accused to be “justifying a domination system” (*Wijers and Lap-Chew*, 1997).

As Creole societies are founded originally on a slavery system, the latter impacts on male-female relationships are still felt through the identification of a common enemy. Indeed, “everything happens as if, in order to maintain a precarious balance in male-female relationships, we had to present ourselves as companions in misfortune: the black woman raped by the white man and the black man exploited by the white man. They can become reconciled through a common enemy but the old dispute continues all the same” (*Nuissier*, 2013). This particular contentious matter between men and women comes from the former blaming the latter for consenting implicitly to the torturers’ acts of victimization. “This ‘founding myth,’ beyond its historical veracity, may explain dispossession: man is deprived of the woman who is stolen and raped by the master and the woman has been robbed of her body by the master. The myth of the founding rape implies that the black woman could not have any desire for the white master and that she is necessarily his victim; it also continues the illusion of an untarnished African past which has been soiled by the White man. This myth still exists in the Guadeloupe common sense, which implies that relationships between men and women are not yet ‘peaceful’ except in this island” (*Mulot*, 2000). Hence these relationships could still be thought of as marked by suspicion since women are never considered as real victims, as far as they are supposed to be consenting. In line with this view, one could imagine that violence against women is playing a secondary part and that the credibility granted to them would remain an issue in dispute.”

Consequently, in order to fully comprehend prostitution question in Creole societies, it is necessary to return to the woman’s situation in Creole societies. Our analysis must also take into account more traditional factors, including the country of origin, the economic means, the different forms of prostitution, the prostitution of minors, HIV/AIDS transmission, and the notion of community viewed from the known and unknown angles, the discussed and the taboo, the foreigner and the fellow country man and woman.

Statistics on the French territories in the Americas

According to the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), there are 450,000 inhabitants in each of the Guadeloupe and Martinique islands. There are 250,000 inhabitants in the French Guiana. The average immigration rate is 6.5%, but it is double in Guiana, a territory which is 40 times larger than Guadeloupe and Martinique put together (INSEE, 2006). The GDP per person is 21,458 US\$ (19,812 €) (Statistics INSEE, 2013) with an annual increase of 0.8%. This rate is 27% below the one in metropolitan France (excepting Ile-de-France). These figures are very much the same as those in a study conducted by François Guillemaut in 2009, “a GDP per person of 18,846 US\$ (17,400 €) in Guadeloupe versus 32,276 US\$ (29,800 €) in metropolitan France, an unemployment rate close to 25% (22% men versus 30% women) and a number of RMI (minimum income allowance) beneficiaries much higher than in metropolitan France (15% of the population, 90% of which are women). The economy is based on family consumption as well as on promoted immigration (by the Office for promoting migrations in overseas territories - BUMIDOM, 1963-1982) and is a substitute for the plantation economy which has been decreasing since the 50’s”. These territories are defined as ultra peripheral ones after the European standards. The average unemployment rate in the three territories is 26% of the active population (INSEE, 2014), which represents twice as much as in metropolitan France. The average density is 249.2 inhabitants per square meter, with the exception of Guiana. The official local statistics on prostitution for the three departments number from 250 to 300 persons for each of them (2009). In other words, these territories suffer a serious precariousness because of unemployment, lack of opportunities, weak industries, trade and agriculture. It is also a country with paradoxes, the main one being the over-remuneration paid to civil servants and local community agents (40% of the gross wage) whereas they already enjoy the employment guarantee. This is also responsible for the weak development of an investment based economy and the massive rush of West Indians and Guyanese towards public services. Arbitrary law enforcement reigns in these territories while the relation to legislation is most peculiar. We can choose the example of Napoleon’s Civil Code existing in the same time that slavery (Black Code) was restored in 1802 by the same Napoleon. On the one hand the Civil Code for Metropolitan France and the Black Code for the people in the tropics.

It has been difficult to estimate the range of prostitution in Creole societies because of the lack of recent figures. This has a positive aspect though as it is the result of charities that take care of these prostituted persons through a global and national undertaking intended to stop exclusion, fight against discrimination and avoid STD transmission by accompanying mothers and children. As a consequence, these charities have to preserve their anonymity so that they are not stigmatized.

However, it is possible to say there are three existing forms of prostitution.

The first one is considered as an old and sedentary one; it is related with maritime activity and occurs in many harbors or in touristic resorts, mostly in streets. The prostituted persons mainly come from the Dominican Republic and from Haiti; they have ID’s and utilize little cabins near their house or a bit farther away to practice their activity.

The second form of prostitution is probably directly connected with women’s exploitation in certain bars. It has been proved that there is a relationship between this exploitation and an

organized network in direct connection with drug trafficking. Another form of organized prostitution can be found in the Dutch part of Saint Martin Island. It targets women from South America (Colombia, Venezuela) and from the Dominican Republic. They are between 20 and 30 years old and they also prostitute themselves in bars. In the French part of the island prostitution seems to be more discreet and masked: some women receive clients at their home after soliciting in shopping malls or in the streets.

Yolande Geadah asks the following question: “Must prostitution be considered as a sexual exploitation which is not acceptable nowadays or as a profession which deserves protection and social cover?” Most of the time, when the issue of women’s prostitution is tackled, it is often associated with a violent and dependent situation in the face of a man who pretends to play a protective part and who, in truth, exploits women. Unlike in Europe, there is no prostitution of persons from Eastern countries or Africa organized by criminal gangs. However, there have been a few cases in relation with human and drug trafficking. In most cases, an impression of autonomy appears to be prevailing as women have already been family heads. Thus this notion of autonomy has to do with the representation of women in Creole societies.

Prostitution and migration

“The primary question here concerns woman’s exclusion: they have no access to work and, above all, to its fair remuneration. The lack of perspectives in their country of origin, the impossible access to legal migration conditions, combined with the demand of workers in sectors which offer no regulation and no protection, allow the development of illegal migration routes and exploitation by labor within the informal (or illegal) market. Then the trafficking issue is considered through the structural conditions of women’s oppression” (*Guillemaut, 2004*).

In Creole societies and particularly in the West Indies and in Guiana most prostituted persons come from the Dominican Republic or from Haïti. French territories in the Americas appear as an Eldorado among the Caribbean which is an archipelago of poverty; it is not a surprise that women should come there to prostitute themselves.

The geographic origin of the women is significant for people. Prostitution also means stigmatization insofar as all the women from these islands are thought to be prostituted persons in the public opinion. Generalization is a phenomenon that spreads easily and makes the collective imagination think that a child whose mother is from Haiti or the Dominican Republic is a prostituted child.

Prostitution and economic means

The economic issue does not only concern migrant women. “Masked prostitution” is more and more often referred to in Creole societies. It involves women who ask their lovers to pay for rent, bills, shopping, entertainment, and gifts. While these relationships do not represent direct forms of payment, they are indirect forms of payment, motivated by economic difficulties in a country where unemployment is rampant on a large scale. We could think that this system is to the economic advantage of women through welfare payments and other

allocations whereas men are not eligible for any of them. Hence women have an artificial economic power that men are jealous of. On one hand the French system which is based on solidarity allows help to modest households and people in difficult situations; but on the other hand it brings about a kind of perversion in the economic relationships between men and women although this has been caused in part by men. In effect, it is only because they perceive love relationships through economic relations and economic power that they speak of disguised prostitution, which is an expression that the women never use.

A form of invisible prostitution tends to be developing among students and high school girls from destitute families. It occurs mainly when money is needed to improve daily life; the Creole expression is KPN (Koké Pou Ni) which means literally “to have sexual intercourse in order to get money.” This form of prostitution incurs a double violence. Beside the financial precariousness, it implies the risk of HIV/AIDS transmission since men over 50 are the second most infected population. Some associations that take care of minors have worried about this situation. They have brought to light regular relations between 55-60 year-old men and minors whose main motive is to supplement their income or get material goods.

Prostitution and HIV/AIDS transmission

These two elements are closely related because of the numerous partners and the lack of condom use. Multiple sexual acts increase the risks of transmitting STD like the HIV/AIDS. Occasional prostitution also puts people at high risk, particularly prostituted minors, as their young age does not give them sufficient authority to demand protected intercourse with adults who request risky behaviors.

Prostitution as a form of control for and by men

Whether men are talking about masked prostitution or old men are having sexual relations with young girls, each of them has a negative image of woman. Above all, she is a sexual object, a means to meet men's personal needs. The old dispute between man and woman is still present. The woman is necessarily considered a prostituted person, whether or not she is one, for she is always supposed to have been responsible for the original deceit because of her sexual relations with her master. As a consequence, women cannot be but disloyal and unfaithful. It allows men to maintain their control over them, to satisfy their needs and also to make them feel guilty through the situation they impose on them and through the victimized position they adopt for themselves.

This is a real form of violence towards women since men can thus maintain women's subordination and accuse them of an ever possible unfaithfulness. It is also a way of satisfying some needs they do not dare to satisfy with their official partner. It is an opportunity to utilize these women as objects, as long as they are paying, and to whom they do not have to give any justification for these needs. There is no need for them to respect women, who are not partners but only objects for satisfying sexual urges.

Charitable organisations such as the Fédération Féminine d'Organisation et de Revalorisation Culturelle Économique et Sociale (FORCES), Kaz Créole, the Association pour la Prévention et l'Accompagnement des Publics en Difficultés (APAPED) are most

vigilant in terms of violence towards women. FORCES works mostly at studying the evolution of violence towards women and at promoting women in general, whereas associations such as Kaz Créole or APAPED are more involved in mothers' and children's overall care, health and education.

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