

CHILD PROSTITUTION ON THE RISE IN BRAZIL

By Selma B. de Oliveira

Brazil's economic crisis in recent years has aggravated chronic social ills, placing the country among other nations with the highest degree of unbalanced distribution of land and wealth in the world. As a sad illustration of further social decay, the Brazilian Center for Childhood and Adolescence (CBIA) has recently estimated that there are about 500,000 girls who have turned to prostitution to earn a living. Some of these girls are as young as nine years old.

The prostitution of girls in Brazil is the direct consequence of years of economic recession, and the low status afforded to women in the country. Because women have a limited access to occupations and resources, they are the ones hardest hit during economic crises.

Since the 1960's, a massive wave of migration has occurred in Brazil. A large number of these migrants who come to the cities looking for work end up living in crowded slums. As the number of slum dwellers grow, so do the numbers of street children. Traditionally, the boys have been the ones more noticeable in the streets; however, as more extreme levels of poverty strike families and the family support system disintegrates, more girls have been forced into the streets. Journalist Gilberto Dimenstein, who has carried out extensive investigations of the lives of street children, suggests that poverty is the principal reason most girls are forced into prostitution. In his book, *Girls of the Night*, Dimenstein points out that some families force their own daughters into prostitution for food or additional income. "Poverty makes promiscuity look normal. Scenes such as the selling of daughters by their mothers and needle abortions, stop provoking shock and indignation. They become part of day to day life." Family problems, not unrelated to poverty, may also lead the girls to prostitute themselves. For instance, Dimenstein notes that the majority of the girls he interviewed come from broken homes. These girls faced the death of relatives, alcoholism, or sexual abuse in the home. He also notes that many girls denounced their stepfathers as their main abusers. In addition, traditional social mores may also lead the girls into the streets, as when girls lose their virginity, they are often rejected by their families. Thus, many girls see the streets and prostitution as a way to freedom from conflict and violence at home. Some girls are also fleeing boring work, and see in prostitution a way to earn more money and become more independent.

With the growth of the tourism industry, selling their bodies has become a way for poor girls to have access to the dollars of tourists. According to research done by the sociologist Marlene Vaz, with the support of UNICEF, in the city of Salvador, Bahia, young girls are brought to foreign ships that anchor by the Bahia de Todos os Santos. To avoid the scrutiny of the Federal Police, the girls head to the ships at night and leave just before dawn. According to the report, some agencies send photos of Brazilian girls to Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy. There, foreign tourists choose their companion for the days they will be staying in Salvador. The tourists pay the agency in advance in dollars.

Ana Vasconcelos is the founder of Casa de Passagem (Passage House), an organization doing pioneer work with prostitutes in the city of Recife, Pernambuco. She notes that as girls usually have few marketable skills, sex becomes the only avenue for survival. In a talk she gave in Mill Valley, California, Vasconcelos explained the lack of alternatives these young women have. "In my country the minimum wage is around \$80 dollars a month. Sometimes a woman can get \$200 dollars with a man that comes on a cruise ship... You have to pay rent. You have kids. You help your mother. How can you quit prostitution when you have much more money, and then survive with minimum wage? Most of these children barely know how to read and write."

In *Girls of the Night*, Dimenstein denounces the trafficking of girls who are forced to work as prostitutes in the Amazon region, especially in mining towns. He explains the system of debt bondage under which the girls are kept. At first, the girls are told of job openings, usually in a restaurant or a luncheonette, in faraway regions. Upon their arrival, the girls are informed they already owe the money for transportation, and can only leave after paying it. In addition, the girls have to pay rent for their room, and often receive perfumes and clothes from the owner of the brothel. Very often, the girls have no control over the money they make, as their clients pay directly to the owner of the brothel or night club for "the services" rendered. Diseases, such as malaria, are very common to the region, and when the girls get sick, and are unable to work, they have additional expenses with medication and food, making it more difficult to pay the "debt" which only increases.

In these places, the girls are stripped even further of any vestige of their human rights. On the trail of the trafficking of girls, Dimenstein encountered a brothel in the city of Imperatriz that auctioned virgin girls. He explains that as a new virgin arrives in the town, men come to the brothel and the auction of the girl takes place. Usually, sons of rich landowners are the ones to offer the highest bid and to gain the right to be the first.

Escaping from these isolated places, which very often can only be reached by plane or boat, becomes very difficult. The girls are kept under the constant threat of mistreatment and violence, and, in many instances, they find no protection from law officials. A 1992 article from the newspaper *Folha de Sao Paulo* denounced that in the mining town of Cuiu-Cuiu, in the state of Para, the police were receiving weekly "contributions" from owners of nightclubs keeping enslaved girls. According to the article the police were fully aware of the practices of the nightclubs, and even had a document signed by the police chief in which the names of the nightclub owners and the amount of money given by them were listed. There were also denunciations that the Military Police, following orders of night club owners, chased the victims who tried to escape from their captors, physically punishing them and even causing their death.

In large urban centers, police brutality against prostitutes is a routine practice. Usually the police arrest the girl, rape and release her. Vasconcelos denounces that some policemen have provoked miscarriages during arguments with girls in the street by kicking the girls in their stomach.

In the streets, the girls are also under the threat of disease. Vasconcelos suggests that the government shares the blame for the proliferation of diseases, especially of AIDS. She says that the girls in Recife know about the disease, usually through television, but have no way to avoid it. Vasconcelos points out that the government tends to scare people with the message of its campaign: "Be careful about AIDS. AIDS kills!" But at the same time, it does not distribute condoms, and Brazil is a country where condoms are expensive luxuries for those who are going hungry. It is important to note that social mores and the discomfort that adults have towards adolescent sexuality limit the kind of information and services offered to young women. This is an impediment to efforts that could prevent early pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among girls. Vasconcelos, during her first experiences working in social programs sponsored by the government of Pernambuco, took notice of the taboo surrounding the issue of prostitution. "The government did not want to work with girls. The government did not want to discuss sexuality. The government did not want to discuss prostitution."

The consequences of the negative attitudes that society has toward these girls are clearly reflected in their low sense of self-esteem that comes with the feeling of being rejected. The degree of low self-esteem and self-hatred is such that many girls respond to the general hostility against them by inflicting violence upon themselves. It is common for girls to cut themselves. This is a way to ask for people's attention. As Ana Vasconcelos points out, these acts of self-mutilation and suicide attempts are very often done around other people as a way to ask for help.

Due to the singularities that the experience of "being a girl" entails, there must be social programs specifically geared to meeting the needs of marginalized girls. In the city of Recife, Pernambuco, prostitutes find a refuge from the chaos of the outside world in the organization "Casa de Passagem," a meeting place where they can discuss the problems involved in "being a prostitute" with psychologists in private sections, and with other prostitutes in group sections. The organization also offers food and shelter for prostitutes, as well as trade classes.

"Casa de Passagem" has been recognized around the world for its innovative work with poor girls, being a potential "blueprint" model to replicate elsewhere. Self-empowerment is at the center of the organization's approach. The girls learn about their rights as children and as citizens. As Vasconcelos explains, they also learn about feminism, about women's rights and their potential as agents of social change. "You have to know that you are a citizen, that you have rights, that there is a constitution in this country, and it is up to anyone of us to make this constitution work."

Thus, at "Casa the Passagem" therapy occurs in a holistic way. While each individual experience, fear, and anxiety is shared with psychologists and other women, each girl is given the opportunity to "see" the "whole picture," as Ana Vasconcelos explains. "We begin to explain to them about history, how it comes to be, how we count on, one day something happening. So we give them an idea of life. They all become revolutionary. They all become involved in changing history."

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Caius Brando, Project Director The Brazil Project of the International Child Resource Institute (ICRI) 1810 Hopkins St. Berkeley, CA 94707 USA Tel (510) 644-1000 Email icri@igc.org

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