

Investigation article

GENDER IDENTITY IN YOUNG WOMEN PRACTICING PROSTITUTION  
IN HAVANA, CUBA<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT

THE RESEARCH ADDRESSES THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GENDER IDENTITY IN YOUNG WOMEN PRACTICING PROSTITUTION IN HAVANA, CUBA. THE RESEARCH PROBLEM WAS: WHAT CHARACTERISTICS HAS THE GENDER IDENTITY AS A COMPLEX MOTIVATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PERSONALITY IN A GROUP OF YOUNG WOMEN PRACTICING PROSTITUTION? THE GENERAL GOAL CONCERNING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GENDER IDENTITY IN THESE SELECTED INDIVIDUALS DERIVED FROM IT. ANALYSIS DIMENSIONS OF GENDER IDENTITY AS A CATEGORY WERE: SELF-IMAGE, ASSESSMENT OF THE IMAGE, SELF-IDEAL, CONFLICTS, AND STRATEGIES FOR THE SOLUTION OF CONFLICTS. A QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY AND THE METHOD OF STUDY OF MULTIPLE SAMPLES WERE IMPLEMENTED. THE SAMPLE INCLUDED SEVEN INDIVIDUALS, AND INTERVIEWS AND OBSERVATION WERE EMPLOYED AS TECHNIQUES. AS METHODS OF PROCESSING AND ANALYZING INFORMATION, THE CONTENTS ANALYSIS AND THE CASE DYNAMIC ANALYSIS WERE USED. MAIN RESULTS FOCUSED ON A TRADITIONAL SELF-IMAGE. THE ASSESSMENT OF

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SELF-IMAGE IS GENERALLY AMBIVALENT. ON THE ONE HAND, ACCORDING TO SELF-IDEAL, THEY WISH TO BECOME SUCCESSFUL PROSTITUTES, BUT ON THE OTHER HAND THEY DESIRE TO BE GOOD MOTHERS AND WIVES. THESE NEEDS IN CONFLICT SHOW THAT BOTH ACCOMPLISH THE TRADITIONAL NORMS OF GENDER. AS STRATEGIES FOR THE SOLUTION OF CONFLICTS, THEY AGREED TO CONTINUE PRACTICING PROSTITUTION TO INCREASE THEIR ECONOMIC LEVEL, SATISFYING ONE OF THE NEEDS IMMEDIATELY AND LEAVING BEHIND THE OTHER FOR THE COMING FUTURE.

KEY WORDS: GENDER IDENTITY, PROSTITUTION, WOMEN, YOUNG PEOPLE

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the identity category in Social Sciences and Psychology dates back to the 1950s, when psychoanalyst Erick Erikson proposed this term as a result of experiences associated with identity loss or crisis, more than with its presence. This author believes that identity is the core of personality (1). Individual or personal identities are built through the appropriation of socializing agents (family, school, work center, informal groups and community) and the collective or social identities. A collective identity involves "the simultaneous integration of beliefs, representations, values, affections, attitudes, conducts and distinctive and differentiating qualities of an individual and the social group involved." Gender identity is a sort of collective identity (1).

Bearing in mind the foregoing, this research focuses on the scientific problem, namely, the characteristics of gender identity that turn this issue into a complex motivational formation of the personality within a group of young women practicing prostitution. The sample was made up by seven young women. The social situation in which they have

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lived was explored, thus allowing us to understand, elucidate and deepen our knowledge on the building process of their gender identity.

The gender concept was used, for the first time, in 1955 by John Money within the framework of the clinical practice of sexuality. Between the 1960s and 1970s, he defined this reality "in a system he called Gender-Identity/Role," alluding to the relationship between the identity as a man or a woman and its expression within the behavioral context: ". . . the gender identity is the private experience of the gender role, and the gender role, in turn, is the public experience of gender identity" (2, 3).

In this research, gender identity is construed as: awareness of oneself and of the body due to one's gender status resulting from the regulated-assessed system assigned to persons according to sex. This allowed the definition and regulation of one's behavior in performing socially assumed gender roles. The femininity and masculinity coexist in the gender identity.

The personal identity, of which the gender identity forms part, consolidates during youth, when the personality assumes a self-educating perspective and projects are formulated in a different time perspective to give life some meaning.

Today, gender inequality is still present in many spheres of daily life. Though there is a certain rupture in the prevailing gender power, we still foresee a long way to go which constitutes a challenge for multiple researches on the gender-oriented studies.

Likewise, prostitution, also known as "commercial sex" or "sexual work," is a complex social phenomenon that has been present in the history of mankind in every society, notwithstanding the prevailing social, economic and political regime. It is hidden in keeping with

nuances, forms of expression, rejection and acceptance by socializing agents. We should bear in mind the economic, psychological, social, political and historical conditions in which we live.

If we take into consideration the etymological point of view, prostitution derives from the Latin *prostitutio, onis*, from *prostituere*, to sell. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines prostitution as any activity in which a person exchanges sexual services for money or any other good (4).

The United Nations (UN) has declared that prostitution and sexual trafficking of women and minors is the sole slavery still present today. Extortion, abuse, violence, rape and even kidnapping characterize the life conditions of most of these women (5). In Cuba, women practicing prostitution in 1990 were known as *jineteras* (hookers), a term associated with "struggle," "resolve", "easy life" and "fun"; and the phenomenon is known as *jineterismo* (6).

According to scientific research conducted in Cuba (7, 8), after the triumph of the Revolution a prostitution boom was reported during the 1990s. Currently, Cuba is promoting a policy to face and prevent this crime (9). In other reviewed bibliographies (10-15), the research with a group of prostitutes is also significant due to the visibility other groups grant to it. This is a poorly studied, devaluated and discriminated group with a low place in the social hierarchy; they are already marked by exclusion and undervalue. According to the aforementioned, this research was aimed at characterizing the gender-identity in seven young women practicing prostitution in Havana, Cuba.

#### MATERIAL AND METHOD

The qualitative research methodology was applied. The sample was made up by seven women selected on the basis of the following criteria: women between 18 and 29 years

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old, living in Havana, practicing prostitution at least for two years and willing to cooperate with the research.

The object of study category used in this research was gender identity; the dimensions for its analysis included: image of herself, ideal for herself, conflicts, and strategies for conflict solutions.

The multiple-case study method was used. This method implies the study of multiple cases simultaneously.

The techniques used were:

- Individual interview: at least, two interviews were conducted. They were semi-structured so as to explore the main personality areas. The first one explores all performing areas of the women studied; and the second to dwell on the characteristics of gender identity in these women.
- Observation: to explore life contexts and aspects in women practicing prostitution at the time of the research.

The procedure used for data collection included the literal transcription of what these women expressed in all techniques applied. Afterwards, the search for regularities through the content analysis and the case dynamic analysis; the latter was conducted in accordance with the following methodological or functional indicators (3):

- categories: information was divided into segments grouped in categories created by the author;
  - affective link with the content expressed: pleasure or displeasure, acceptance or rejection, satisfaction or dissatisfaction; different feelings of conformity, guilt, love, hate and/or ambivalent emotions, among others;
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- personal elaboration of content: doubts, self-questioning and contradictions which resulted in a customized analysis of this problem.

The information analysis was done in the following manner: first, an analysis of each interview followed by a case-by-case analysis resulting in a comprehensive analysis in accordance with the established dimensions.

## RESULTS

This section includes two subsections: significant regularities found in the life history and gender identity characterization of women under study. Despite the fact that the first section was not an explicit objective of this research, we considered it relevant due to the resourceful, significant and repetitive regularities found which are hidden in completely different places and environments in which each of these women practiced prostitution. Besides, they allowed us to characterize interviewed women and understand, elucidate and deepen on the social situation they have faced in their daily life, which revealed differences and similarities.

### Significant regularities found in this research in the life history of young women practicing prostitution

Most of these women were unemployed; six were employed but were fired or decided to abandon their jobs looking for a better social and economic situation since they were constantly dissatisfied with their salaries.

CASE 1. "When you experience this life you never quit . . . You won't quit because it's no use quitting it for just a basic salary of 300 pesos. A very low salary; now I can buy a car and a house well in advance. I can be a prostitute up there because I have an open visa to Mexico" (interview 1).

CASE 3. "It is something good because I have my own money, my own things, everything. I do not depend on anyone, I don't have to work a whole month to earn ten dollars. No. For me, that would be a stupid thing to do" (interview 1).

Most women grew up in families with economic needs, deprivation and poverty which, seemingly, constituted an important trigger for this kind of behavior, at least in women studied in this research. We consider the economic situation of great significance, since it implies a contravention against what they lacked during their childhood because they come from dull or socially disadvantaged zones and most of them want to practice prostitution by socializing with friends or couples. They all stated their economic remuneration for practicing prostitution by giving priority to a higher economic situation instead of feelings.

Most of them came from dysfunctional families in which the father is recurrently far from them or absent. The family members living with them are, in general, apathetic concerning the practice of prostitution since they do not accept or reject this trade. However, they receive economic benefits from this practice.

They perceived submission, fragility, gentleness, control of affections and capacity to take care of others as inherent characteristics of women and attributed them to what is considered as female.

We have also recorded the subordination they have to pimps. However, they resorted to power-resistant strategies and limits regarding their bodies as a reaction against the submission under which they live. Likewise, they were not aware of this subordination and believed it was something natural. In contrast to this position, they feel "empowered" for complying with the universal beauty canons, being objects of sexual desire and having a body coveted by others. However, their power is all show of

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precarious nature associated with devalued practices in which they expose their bodies to another person, thus generating unpleasing costs.

CASE 1. (Strategies) "Sometimes, when I am with a foreigner, I would like to stab him on his neck and kill him" (interview 2).

CASE 3. (Limits) "Frequently, I won't let them touching me frequently or kissing me or touching my breasts" (interview 2).

The assessment of prostitution provided by these young women was ambivalent.

CASE 4. (Negative sense -) "A moment comes in which...everything feels the same . . . there are no differences, it's like something so . . . that could have been very nice in the life of persons, having sex, and when this becomes part of your job, then you do not see the difference . . ." (interview 1)

CASE 5. (Positive sense +) "If I like someone—well, as I have always done, because if I like him yes, if I don't like him no—; I have to like him or find him attractive" (interview 1).

They established relations with their couples through gender violence with a particular response by these women, so this has been a crossed violence.

CASE 2. "Ah, sometimes he is very sophisticated, and even offend Cubans, so I have to punch him" (interview 2).

#### Gender identity characterization in women under study

The construction of gender identity in these women was explored under the following dimensions: image of herself, assessment of her image, ideal image, conflicts, and strategies for conflict solution.

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In the image of herself as a woman, we confirmed, in general, the traditional image of "being a woman" which antagonized with what is considered as male. They have, in a naturalized manner, a social space assigned to it. They are in charge of their homes and of the social, affective and economic wellbeing of the others. However, on many occasions, they are the main or sole economic providers. The abovementioned statement, from a gender perspective, constitutes a breach of what is traditionally considered as female, but this is nothing but a fake breach, because that money is used for a traditional purpose: taking care of others or handing over all the money to their couples. Likewise, they considered that this was their obligation, a duty, an inescapable future, what has been designed for them, which is evident. From another perspective, maternity constitutes a role traditionally assigned to women and, consequently, something they want to achieve. Motherhood becomes an essential component of the gender identity construction; however most of them postpone this project. In one of the participants we confirmed the fear of not being able to fulfill—while their chronological age increases—this compulsory, unavoidable and inevitable project due to their gender status. In another case, it was considered as non-traditional, different and contravening. In regard to their body image, they were all characterized by the constant care of their esthetic and personal appearance. Playing the role of prostitute-women implied complying with universal beauty canons. It also includes empowerment using the body since it is the object sexually desired and envied by others.

Participants referred to stereotyped gender patterns which they considered inherent to them as sensuality and beauty in order to have an impact on their jobs and their future projection since they wish to become successful prostitutes (earning large sums of money). There is an affective dependence on the person with whom they establish a

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steady partner's relationship. They considered themselves as fragile and dependent. As regards these women's image, they had the traditional concept of belonging to this group. They considered themselves as inescapable compliers of the traditional mandate they have due to their gender condition.

CASE 1. "I help my mother a lot . . ." (interview 3).

CASE 2. "To have children, marry, have a good husband, a big house, my own business to bring my grandmother with me and take good care of her" (interview 2).

Likewise, the assessment of prostitution is ambivalent since women under study showed a positive sense (+) associated with the compliance of beauty canons traditionally assigned to prostitutes and because of the high economic benefits. The negative sense (-), in general, was associated with the breach and failure to achieve mandates thus evidencing the traditional selection of all these gender constructions. Only one case failed to provide this ambivalent assessment as woman, responding in a completely negative way because she had not been capable to achieve what she expected from life: to have a "woman" couple and feel stability. Besides, this participant confirmed the traditional way of assessing herself due to the extreme importance and dependence she has with a partner, thus evidencing the traditional way of thinking herself as a woman.

Significantly, they agreed on the fact that "it is easier to practice prostitution as a woman." This idea is a stereotype found in the gender collective memory of these women. This image derives from the patriarchal culture since having a female gender identity implies greater possibilities in the practice of prostitution.

In the gender identity characterization being a woman is cyclically intertwined with being a prostitute-woman. For these women, it was very difficult to separate one identity from

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the other, since being a woman practicing prostitution organizes her gender identity, the constant wish to quit from being the ideal whore to become the ideal mother-wife (16) confirms that in terms of subjectivity being a woman is more important than being a prostitute.

In the ideal of herself, we confirmed that, in general, the persons interviewed wish to become successful prostitutes and mother-wife women. The first ideal implies having a good economic situation and a high monetary level, but this wish is just only the means to free themselves from captivity (whore) and become mothers-wives, more accepted by the society. According to Marcela Lagarde, this result can be construed as these women's wish to have high economic incomes (successful whores) and then enter another captivity (mothers-wives) more respected and accepted by society and "complying with the rules they expressed to themselves" (16).

In conflicts faced due to their gender, we found that in most of them one of two needs or both—in an antagonistic relationship—were associated with the compliance of traditional gender mandates as the cornerstone and unswerving condition of their identity.

CASE 3. The need to have so many partners to comply with the mandate of always being an object of desire and the need to have a steady relationship with a foreigner.

CASE 4. To have a steady couple and quit prostitution.

In strategies for conflict solution, in general, they included meeting the two antagonistic needs in the long run and meeting the second need in the future. Most of them mentioned, as a strategy, to continue practicing prostitution to meet their material needs and improve their living standards. For the future they included their wish to become "mothers," "having children" and "having a good man."

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## CONCLUSIONS

As to gender identity, they presented themselves as traditional women, in opposition to what is considered as the hegemonic male. In most cases, their image assessment was ambivalent. Their ideal image confirmed that they wanted to become successful prostitutes and mother-wife women. As to conflicts faced, one or the two needs within a conflicting relationship was to comply with the traditional gender mandates as cornerstone and unswerving condition of their identity. Strategies aimed at solving these conflicts included: meeting one of the two antagonistic first, and the other need in the future.

## ANNEX 1. GUIDE FOR INTERVIEW 1

### Interview 1

#### Objective

To explore the different performance spheres of the subject in order to collect general information on her personality functioning (emphasizing gender identity).

#### General information

- Personal information: age, sex, birthplace, marital status, duration of marriage or union, skin color, number of children, persons living together, educational level, occupation, municipality, current province of residence, previous residential place (if appropriate).
  - Partner's information: age, sex, educational level, and profession.
  - Economic situation: favorable, unfavorable, average.
  - Monthly earnings.
  - How long have she been practicing prostitution?
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#### Educational level

- Completed studies.
- Educational track.
- School adaptation.
- School performance.
- Influence of school, classmates, teachers and the general educational environment in her own development.
- School progress and performance, knowledge liking, professional interests, preferred subjects or knowledge spheres.
- Aspirations.
- Relationship with classmates and teachers.
- Recreational activities (use of free time and preferred games).
- Anecdotes.

#### Current areas of work

- Work center.
  - Specific labor post.
  - Promotion to that post.
  - Time in the work center.
  - Time in that post.
  - Satisfaction with work center.
  - Satisfaction with work performance.
  - Expectations.
  - Satisfaction with herself.
  - Ideal job.
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## Family environment

### Childhood:

- Persons living with her during childhood.
  - Parents' occupation. (Educational level of each parent, profession or labor occupation, relations with his/her couple, economic situation of the family.)
  - Parent's concept of what is male and female.
  - Resemblance with parents or family.
  - Childhood development (games, demands, tasks).
  - Memories of her family.
  - Affection felt, attachments.
  - Harmony at home.
  - Place among brothers/sisters, relations with them and with parents, rivalries, similarities.
  - Education received as man or woman. Differences. Anecdotes.
  - Family assessment of prostitution.
  - Family assessment of prostitution practiced by the subject.
  - Family influence in the practice of prostitution.
  - Family knowledge about prostitution practiced by subject.
  - Family opinion on prostitution.
  - Family opinion on subject practicing prostitution.
  - Models. Demands.
  - Family aspirations for her.
  - Childhood and youth roles.
  - Concept of daughter or son.
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- Anecdotes.

Currently:

- Members of the household
  - Economic level of the family. Salary of family members. Survival alternatives.
  - Educational level of family members.
  - Characteristics of family life and family relations.
  - Pleasant and unpleasant experiences remembered within her family.
  - Main concerns.
  - Conflicts with family members.
  - Family members with whom she has better relations. Status of her relations.
  - Abandoning family.
  - Number of children, sex, age, and schooling.
  - Relations with daughters/sons.
  - Concept of mother or father.
  - Expectations of herself.
  - Satisfactions with herself.
  - Pregnancy planning.
  - Feelings for her children. Satisfactions and dissatisfactions.
  - Time shared with her children.
  - Perception of her children's assessment.
  - Perception of her children's assessment of her practicing prostitution.
  - Assessment of prostitution by her family.
  - Family conflicts. Responsibility.
  - Distribution of household chores. Satisfactions and dissatisfactions.
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- Meaning of private and public world.
- Personal expectations of her family performance.
- Assessment of performance in this sphere by her relatives.
- Family interests.
- Family social life.
- Moral values prevailing at home.
- Religious beliefs of family members or relatives.
- Status of marriage relations.
- Concept of family and children.

## ANNEX 2. GUIDE FOR INTERVIEW 2

### Interview 2

#### Objective

To explore the different performance spheres of the subject in order to collect general information on her personality functioning (emphasizing gender identity).

To summarize what was dealt with in the previous interview.

#### Partner's sphere

- History of her life with a partner.
  - Information on partner: age, educational level, profession, others (job, posts).
  - Duration of marriage or union.
  - Satisfaction with her partner.
  - Conflicts with partner.
  - Perception of support.
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- Tensions, conflicts, dissatisfaction.
- Distribution of gender roles.
- Expression of gender roles associated with money, sexuality, partying with friends, responsibilities, control over her body and control of her schedule.
- Concept of love and marriage.
- Partner's support to her practicing prostitution and professional environment.
- Concept of herself as a wife.
- Expectations of her role as wife.
- Satisfaction with her role as wife.
- Impact of her practicing prostitution in her relationship with her partner.
- If she believes her partner has some special quality/characteristic for her practicing prostitution.
- Aspirations for her relationship with her partner.
- Aspirations for her relationship with her current partner.
- Love life...
- Her relationships with partners...
- Anecdotes.

#### Personal sphere

- Sense of life.
  - Greatest satisfactions of her life.
  - Most significant frustrations of her life.
  - Causes and ways of facing them. Mechanisms used.
  - Discomforts or sufferings in her life.
  - What she does in her free time.
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- Health condition.
  - Personal accomplishment.
  - Preferences and likings.
  - Self-description.
  - Current qualities: physical, moral or psychological qualities (how she sees herself, how she would like others to know or remember her).
  - Defects and virtues.
  - Strategies for improvement.
  - Satisfaction with her corporal and psychological image.
  - Cost for practicing prostitution.
  - Problems, conflicts.
  - Interests.
  - Self-assessment.
  - Concept of woman
  - Differences between men and women.
  - Satisfaction for being a woman.
  - Meaning of prostitution.
  - Differences between men and women practicing prostitution.
  - Aspirations, life objectives.
  - What she understands by paternity, maternity and prostitution.
  - Toxic habits (alcohol, smoking, drug, etc.).
  - Image of herself as a woman.
  - Concept of female and male.
  - Expectations of herself.
  - Satisfactions with herself.
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- Meaning of being a woman.
- Meaning of being a prostitute-woman.
- Particularities of the way in which she practices prostitution.
- Most pleasant events in practicing prostitution.
- Most unpleasant event in practicing prostitution.
- Successful situation in practicing prostitution (real or imagined). Description.
- Failures in practicing prostitution (real or imagined). Description.
- Current description. Difference with previous description.
- Meaning of practicing prostitution.
- Meaning of the prostituted body.
- Causes leading her to practice prostitution.
- Rules for practicing prostitution. Any special rule concerning her body.
- Lessons learned in the practice of prostitution.
- Satisfaction of being a prostitute-woman.
- Whether she feels happy.
- If she had anything to comment or share with us on how she felt and thinks about this interview.

### ANNEX 3. GUIDE FOR OBSERVATION

- If she had an adequate hygiene.
  - The clothes she was wearing.
  - Her physical appearance.
  - Gestures.
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- Facial expressions to the different questions posed.
- Gaze direction.
- Language fluency.
- Attitude towards tasks.
- Attitude towards the interviewer.
- Other relevant information.

#### NOTE

1. This work forms part of the "Gender and Identity" research by the Faculty of Psychology, conducted since 2010 by the PSICOGEN (Psychology and Gender) research group. We express our gratitude to this group for the support provided during the research. The results contained in this article are part of a research project.

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Submission date: May 11, 2015

Date of approval: May 28, 2015