

INTERNATIONAL ROUND TABLE ON PROSTITUTION



ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET (journalist). Hello, greetings to all those who are now tuned to Telesur and, more specifically, to the International Round Table from Havana, Cuba, where specialists in gender violence, prostitution, sex tourism and trafficking in persons have been meeting for three days. This is, more or less, the title of the First Symposium organized in Havana by the National Sex Education Center (CENESEX), headed by Master in Science Mariela Castro Espin, who is here with us today. Welcome and thanks for being here. We also welcome the Swedish expert Kajsa Ekis Ekman, journalist, writer, researcher and author of an interesting book which will help us to get acquainted with some important analysis made this week at the Symposium, also sponsored by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Gender violence and trafficking in persons will be the focus of our dialogue tonight, in a very humid Havana. Despite the fact that violence against women has been the topic of talks across the world and in Cuba during these days due to a great world campaign, we wonder: Why is Cuba organizing an event on gender violence, prostitution, sex tourism, and trafficking in persons? Are we doing so well or so bad to speak about these issues?

MARIELA CASTRO. This is a worldwide problem. I gave you some statistics and I would like you to comment on them, because it is important to know that these problems exist all over the world. No country is free from these problems, which are dealt with in different ways: some places have more studies; others, less studies. Within the National Program on Sex Education and Health (PRONESS), coordinated by CENESEX,

we want to learn from the experiences, researches, good practices, laws and policies in other countries that could be useful for our own strategies. So we requested support from the UNDP and COSUDE to help us finance the invitation of experts from other countries. We have welcomed, for example, experts from Stockholm, Sweden, with experiences that have called the attention across the world (its policy penalizing individuals who buy sex, whom they call the client), and others who consider prostitution as a profession. In this regard, we can speak about the debate that took place at the Symposium on whether or not prostitution should be recognized as a job or profession, or if it is still considered as a form of violent exploitation against persons who are victims of it.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. One of the figures that you gave me this morning at the event states that, according to the Organization of American States (OAS), over one million two hundred thousand minors—most of them women—are victims of a certain kind of sexual abuse. Indirectly, it affects nine million additional persons. This is a millionaire industry earning more than 30 billion dollars at world level, and approximately 16 billion dollars in Latin America alone. It is mainly associated with street children who become victims of sex-business networks and who are forced to sell their bodies. A sexually abused child can become a prostituted human being in the future! You also spoke about this, Kajsa.

KAJSA EKIS EKMAN. I referred to prostitution as a capitalist and patriarchal exploitation. For me, prostitution will never be a job like any other job, not only because figures show that prostitution also implies violence, physical abuse and other forms of abuse, but

also because mortality rate is forty times higher in prostitutes than in non-prostitutes and these figures are not found in any other job. Prostitution is always surrounded by myths. Before, we had the myth of being happy, now we have the myth of the sex job, which is a way of trying to normalize prostitution as if it were a job. I consider that prostitution is always an unwanted sex by one party. Prostitution involves two persons, one who wants and another who does not want. Then, the one who wants pays the one who does not want. Usually, a man is the one who buys and a woman or girl is the one who sells. But there are also men and transpersons who sell sex. There is always a person who wants and a person who does not want which, in my opinion, is against sexual freedom, equality among individuals, between men and women, against mutual sexuality.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. Which is nurturing this business of billions of dollars, and is associated with phenomena such as the trafficking in persons, and that is why it was included in this Symposium. Is it considered an epidemic? Was this issue discussed at the Symposium?

MARIELA CASTRO. Yes, the United Nations have considered female homicide as an epidemic. Countries in our region, and in the world at large, report that the first cause of death in women is assassination by sex partners. This problem is so serious that the United Nations Secretary General has urged to struggle against violence against women and girls. The regional campaign, inspired by the assassination of the Mirabal sisters during Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, has contributed to visualize now the very serious problem of female homicide and, in general, violence against women.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. As I understood by what you said at the Symposium, seven out of ten women at international level are victims of domestic or sexual violence throughout their life, and even one out of four women endures abuse during pregnancy. But you called the attention on the fact that it is not only a matter of physical abuse, the beating, since sometimes people identify gender violence with beatings, with physical mistreatment.

MARIELA CASTRO. The studies presented by Clotilde Proveyer on gender violence in Cuba—the single topic on which we were able to provide figures in Cuba due to the lack of in-depth studies—shed light on how these gender-violence manifestations are perceived in all provinces of the country. The hypothesis is that there are more cases reported in Cuban Eastern provinces, though this should be confirmed by a scientific research. In our country, the predominance lies in psychological, verbal and emotional violence, more than in physical violence. This is not so in other countries where physical violence prevails. There is an impact on jobs and policies favoring women's rights, but these policies have not yet contributed to the elimination of gender violence. We need other comprehensive strategies to tackle these problems, because laws, researches and some actions are not enough; we must do much more. In this regard, we discussed this topic in today's seminar and a very interesting contradiction arose regarding the patriarchal system and the historical inheritance of unequal dominating relations in which men, based on economic binarism hegemony and the gender binarism, are the ones who stand to gain.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. What is binarism?

MARIELA CASTRO. Economic binarism is the world division between rich and poor and the power relationship resulting from this division. But this binarism goes through other binarisms as forms of power and, among them, gender binarism: the dominant and powerful men compared with the victimized women in this situation of violence. As I said before, we discussed that men are also under a victimized situation in a system that teaches them to be like that and places them in a social and health vulnerability situation.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. Is that why you mainly speak about gender violence, more than violence against women? You do not limit it.

MARIELA CASTRO. We speak of both: violence against women to visualize this situation, because we must do it; and also gender violence to understand that both men and women are a result of a system of unequal power relations.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. Mariela also said that every day eight hundred women die due to causes associated with pregnancy and delivery, and almost three hundred thousand women every year; 99 % of these deaths take place in developing countries. And she speaks about children's marriages, girls who marry before being eighteen years old, accounting for more than sixty millions. What a great task for journalists! Was that what motivated your book?

KAJSA EKIS EKMAN. My book deals with two industries: prostitution and womb rental. The latter is a quite recent industry which also exploits the woman's body as merchandise. Both have a lot in common. They are both the most brutal form of capitalism, since the

product sold has not been produced by the human being; the human being itself is sold and, in both cases, the woman, the woman's body.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. It is the sale of the womb, isn't it?

KAJSA EKIS EKMAN. Correct, the sale of the womb. This industry did not exist forty years ago and is now growing every year, especially in the United States and India, where a woman gets pregnant and after delivery she gives away the child to the parents who, let's say, contributed with the genetic material for the pregnancy, both the woman and the man. They pay and leave with the child, and the woman who delivered never sees it again.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. A story of horror. I have also seen a lot of women who, in the midst of an extreme poverty situation in Central America, go to hotels where "first world" women, who want to buy children, stay. I believe that this was dealt with during this first Symposium on gender violence, prostitution, sex tourism and trafficking in persons. Obviously, these are issues of increasing interest throughout the world, in which women and children are the main victims. Mariela, the Symposium has provoked a lot of discussions, because not everybody agrees with everything, and there are differences. What is being done in Sweden, punishing the client, is commendable at international level, something new but not necessarily accepted by all.

MARIELA CASTRO. There are contradictions. We invited Sweden because we think this is an interesting and new model; it must be improved, but it provides us with important lessons. The Swedish model has been greatly criticized, especially by those who are

getting rich with the sex industry and by the buyers. I would like Kajsa to speak about this.

KAJSA EKIS EKMAN. Sweden is trying to respond to the question of who practices prostitution in another way. It has always been said that prostitution is the prostitute; now we say that prostitution is the client, the one who pays: he can say that he is not going to pay and, if he stops paying, if he stops buying, prostitution will no longer exist. Then, what Sweden has been doing since 1999 is fining the client. Since then, prostitution has decreased: before, one out of eight men bought sex, and now just one out of three. In European countries, where this industry has been legalized, a pimp is now a businessman as any other. In Germany and the Netherlands, brothel owners are now businessmen. There, one out of four men buys sex, which is what the industry wants. For capitalism, the ideal situation is that, instead of having free-of-charge sex, we are to pay each other.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. It calls my attention that Kajsa's book is entitled Prostitution versus Womb Rental and Parted Life.

KAJSA EKIS EKMAN. Well, it would actually be the divided being, which will be more or less the translation. It comes from the testimony of prostituted persons I found, and who had something in common, aside from saying that they were doing it by free will or not, they all said it was a tragedy. There was something in common: their strategy to defend themselves from prostitution, to fade, to become insensible, to think in something else, to adopt another name, to prohibit the client from touching some parts of the body or something like that. It is quite complex because under a different sexual

situation it would have meant to be close to the other person, to be together, to feel desire for that person. But it is the opposite for the prostituted person: trying not to be there, thinking in something else.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. This only leads to a situation of economic weakness and vulnerability.

KAJSA EKIS EKMAN. Something that was discussed in-depth was the situation of children abused during infancy that many times end up as prostitutes, because this is also the same self-strategy.

MARIELA CASTRO. Exactly, that is very interesting and painful. It was addressed by Professor Jorge Volnovich, an Argentinean psychoanalyst, who demonstrated how abusers resort to tricks in order to survive, in the scientific, judicial and political language, to even discourage abused children to look for help. He showed very destructive life-long psychological reactions in these persons, how difficult recovery therapy is, and even how that suffering person many times thinks that his/her body is worth nothing, that caring it is worthless since their sexuality has no sense at all because it has been so excessively and cruelly used, that they resort to prostitution to earn their living, because what they have is worthless. It is very complex and very painful. Likewise, he referred to the suffering experienced by the person listening to these very distressing anecdotes, how we must look for help and be careful of the way in which we communicate with ourselves. We felt bad with the few things he told us, and it is very hard that therapists have to look for help so as to be able to endure hearing such terrible human tragedies.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. I'm running out of time, but I know that some of your guests to this event are personalities who can come again. Is this event generating policies or mechanisms that could allow those behind the TV screen to find help?

MARIELA CASTRO. Yes. We want not only to learn from each other, but to create alliances in this meeting to launch concrete actions in our countries, to provide counseling to our peoples.

ARLEEN RODRÍGUEZ DERIVET. And you also have the web site www.cenesex.org, where you can find all the information about this Symposium and information at world level. Such a deep and morally sanctioned pain is silenced; this is a lifelong lacerating pain. Thanks Mariela and Kajsa for your contributions today.

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