

The Plight and Impact of Female Sex Commodification in the City of Bamenda (Cameroon), 1961-2018

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Abstract

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Sex commodification although proscribed by cultural, religious and state institutions in most African countries, has remained a resilient practice sustaining livelihoods. As one of the major gender players in the sex economy, women are particularly affected in various ways, so too is the basic fabric of society and the community at large. It is in this context that this article examines the plights and impacts of female sex actors in the city of Bamenda. It argues that sex commodification is a conscious interplay between sacred tradition and capitalist transformation, survival and morality, stigma and agency. Drawing largely from oral testimonies and employing a qualitative analysis, the study reveals that sex commodification produced divergent consequences. On the one hand, it offered women avenues for livelihood in contexts marked by deprivation and economic crisis. On the other, it exposed them to challenges-psychological; mainly social stigma, and family strain as well as health setbacks manifested by sexually transmitted diseases. Again, the practice ruffled existing African cultural values of female sexuality that was centered on self-worth. The analysis concludes that as actors caught between the need for survival and the pressures of moral and civic condemnation; women engagement in sex commodification demonstrates the trend towards universalizing and particularizing societal actions in contemporary times.

Keywords: Sex, Commodification, Prostitution, Impact, Plight, Bamenda.

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INTRODUCTION

"If you can earn the equivalent of 10,000 francs in a night, why knit sweaters, sell groundnuts, or work in the farm for days and sometimes weeks to earn the same amount?" This rhetorical question, voiced by some women in the Bamenda sex trade in the 21st century, captures the profound mental depth and breadth that has sustained the prostituting industry. It signals a survival strategy in a context where conventional livelihoods often yield meagre returns, and where women navigate between economic necessity and deep social stigma. The commodification of sex in the Bamenda city thus presents a stark paradox. In a society where the female body has historically been revered as sacred, its sexuality bound to fertility, ritual power, and communal honour, sex work has nonetheless persisted across generations, thriving in well-known centres despite cultural, religious, and state proscriptions.

While often cast as immoral, deviant, or socially corrosive, prostitution became for many women not merely an option of last resort but a pathway to socio-

economic advancement. This article examines the plight and impact of sex commodification in the Bamenda city between 1961 and 2018. It argues that prostitution, while offering avenues for livelihood and mobility, also brought profound challenges: health vulnerabilities, social ostracism, family disruption among others. The ensuing analysis therefore explores the physical and economic toll of sex commodification as well as its wider socio-economic implications. It highlights the enduring tensions between sacred tradition and capitalist transformation, showing how women, families, communities, and institutions have navigated the contradictions of survival and morality.

The Plight of Female Actors in Sex Commodification

The debate over whether prostitution constituted a voluntary exchange of sexual services or an act of coercion framed discussions on sex commodification. Yet, regardless of whether participation was driven by consent or compulsion, women who engaged in the trade faced profound and overlapping risks.

The Physical Toll of Sex Commodification

Physical Violence and rape were endemic to the business of sex commoditization in the Bamenda city. Stemming from poverty-stricken backgrounds coupled with little or no education to complement knowledge on sexual exploitation, many prostitutes, without cognizance, suffered violence and rape in the trade. Acts such as the grabbing and pinching of legs, arms, breasts and buttocks for instance, resulting to bruises and scratches became an accepted or rather tolerated norm or even a form of greeting in the business. To add, some men not only dictated the sexual activities to be performed by these women, but had a final say in the remuneration as well.¹ Some buyers demanded sexual acts that were risky and violating, including demands for oral, vaginal, anal sex without a condom and the practice of stealthing. In cases where the women disagreed, they were raped or beaten to silence. As one interviewee recounted;

I started early, in my 20s and I was so petite in size. I could not object when they big men pinched my buttocks or breast. My friend used to tell me to support it; 'money will come after', she will say. I remember having sex with a certain man. He asked for a return of his money after the encounter. According to him, I had not done a good job. When I objected, he created a scene, got me well beaten. The fight ended on the road. I finally gave him back his money, my life was more important. Some men were like that, it was the risk we had to bear. [2]

Sexual harassment, physical or verbal abuse, battery and rape were points on a continuum of violence, all of which occurred regularly. In other cases, the pimps or 'madams' were responsible for the abuse. In order to maintain control, they pulled hair, shouted or humiliated the prostitutes under their control where recalcitrant. [3] More often than not, these women stayed in the business because they had no choice but to work and bring money back as required by the "madams."⁴

Another major challenge that plagued the practice was the fierce competition and comparison among the sex workers. Women engaged in this trade were often highly competitive, which frequently led to unhealthy dynamics. Such competition manifested in constant comparisons, threats, verbal altercations, physical fights, blackmail, and the accumulation of

heavy debts, among others. Regarding this, one prostitute shared that:

At a certain point, I had to pay huge sums of interest for money I'd borrowed because I wanted to look the part of a classy prostitute. I wanted the big men to call me to the luxury hotels. These men demanded classy prostitutes, and they paid well. I wanted to be one, so I borrowed to buy the things that made me look the part. I ended up working for over two years to pay the interest as it was too high. I also had fights with my colleagues because some men started choosing me over them. [5]

Evidently, like most businesses, the need to stay relevant and productive at any cost was aggressive. To worsen matters, the money was never enough. They were either trying to measure up with colleagues or show friends and family members outside the trade that they were doing well. As a result, they often got involved in unnecessary risks and fights often spending their limited earnings either to manage the consequences of those risks or reinvest in order to maintain relevance in the trade. As the interviewee observed; *E be dey like miyongo*. "It was like being in a cult". [6]

Police harassment and random night arrests constituted another plight faced by prostitutes in the city of Bamenda. Aware of the illegality of their trade, many anticipated periodic raids and arrests, often justified under charges of indecency or public disturbance. [7] Without proper identification papers and limited knowledge of their rights, the women were equally vulnerable to exploitation and assault by these law enforcement officers, who frequently demanded bribes for release. Because of the deep social stigma and criminalization surrounding prostitution, few ever reported such abuses. [8] One legal practitioner revealed that in over a decade of practice, he had never encountered a case directly linked to prostitution, [9] an indication of the silence and endurance that characterized the plight of these women.

The Economic Toll of Sex Commodification

Economic instability, civil unrest, and political upheavals profoundly shaped the socio-economic fabric of communities in the city of Bamenda. The nationwide economic crisis of the 1980s for instance, intensified women's economic vulnerability and pushed many into transactional sex as a survival strategy. The political

¹S.Nana-Fabu, *The Feminization of Poverty in Cameroon*, (Yaounde: Cle, 2009) 195.

²Interview with Christa, Doh, aged 35+ sex worker, Mobile-Nkwen, Bamenda, 10 March, 2020.

³ Interview with Joshua Ngulah, aged 40, bar tender, Ghana street-Nkwen, Bamenda, 19 April, 2020.

⁴ Interview with Mary Mah, aged 40+, Coordinator of the NLC at CBC, May 30, 2025

⁵Interview with Beatrice Ngum

⁶Idem. A cult in this case, as per local parlance, will imply a gathering of people constantly requiring something of you in exchange for some supposed benefits.

⁷Interview with Edith Kumi, aged 45+, sex worker, Mobile-Nkwen, Bamenda, June 05, 2021.

⁸Idem

⁹Interview with Benjamin S. Fuh, 60+, lawyer, City Chemist Bamenda, June 25, 2020.

turbulence of the 1990s [¹⁰] further disrupted livelihoods, while the 2008 [¹¹] civil unrest temporarily destabilized the sector. However, the most devastating impact emerged from the ongoing Anglophone crisis that began in late 2016, which not only shattered local economies but also exposed sex workers to heightened insecurity, displacement, and loss of clientele. To elaborate more on the dynamics of such crisis and its bearing on this practice, a prostitute explained her hurdles in this way;

When the 2016 crisis hit, it was not easy for me and my colleagues. First it came with ghost town days which disturbed movements and government curfews which limited night work for us which were our most productive hours. As the crisis worsened, plenty of our customers left the NW for other regions. The available few cried of poverty, reducing the frequency at which they came for our services. The situation reduced our prices per sex rounds. Generally, it has not been easy. Many of my colleagues were bound to leave for other towns. [¹²]

The experience of this adherent summarized lucidly the toll of the crisis on the trade. Aside from that, many prostitutes who silently bore the interest to withdraw from the sector after becoming economically stable and empowered could not afford to, for reasons that ranged poverty to perceived fear and difficulty of reintegrating in to the society. Ultimately, these challenges, among others culminated in a range of psychological, physical and economic impacts, some detrimental, others unexpectedly empowering.

Psychological Impact of Sex Commodification

The proliferation of studies on mental health in contemporary times has brought renewed attention to how trauma, stress, and socio-economic precarity intersect in shaping individual behaviour. Scholars such as Herman [¹³] and Van Der Kolk¹⁴ showed that exposure to trauma in childhood or early adulthood often resulted in enduring patterns of emotional dysregulation, anxiety, and difficulties in forming stable relationships. These insights were especially pertinent in understanding the psychological impact of prostitution in the Bamenda city, where many women entered sex work against a backdrop of poverty, displacement, or family breakdown.

The impact of prostitution on mental health refers to the psychological, cognitive and emotional consequences experienced by individuals involved in prostitution. These consequences include a wide range of mental health issues and difficulties in emotional management and interpersonal relationships. Oral revelations revealed that most street prostitutes suffered or experienced high levels of abuse or victimization in childhood and early adulthood with differences in trauma rates and disorders. [¹⁵] Most came from dysfunctional homes with discordant couples, having witnessed intense levels of violence. [¹⁶] Poor parenting styles were also inadequate in meeting the emotional and psychological needs of the children. In some cases, parents adopted a permissive or laissez-faire approach, providing little supervision or emotional support. In others, authoritarian parenting prevailed, where children were denied freedom of expression and personal exploration. [¹⁷] Additionally, some children experienced parental absence- either due to death or being preoccupied with providing material needs, neglecting the emotional care and attention their children required. Some suffered early marriage choices forced on them by tradition, rape, and inability to provide for themselves amongst others. [¹⁸] All of these dealt a huge deep loss on their self-identity and self-expression. Vulnerable, mentally broken and seeking escape, they became susceptible to negative influences, an unhealthy desire for independence or simply made poor decisions due to lack of ignorance and parental guidance.

Against this background, they suffered stress, pathological ties with control networks, social isolation, loneliness, extreme fear, emotional numbness, insomnia, hyper vigilance, personality disorders, hopelessness and lack of assertiveness in seeking support, resulting in trauma that altered their beliefs and perceptions, causing irreparable damage to their personal identity and life choices. These circumstances were further exacerbated by vulnerability factors such as breadwinners, physical incapacitation, language barriers making them more liable to exploitation by “madams” or “pimps” and bar owners persuading with empty promises oreasily lured by friends who apparently lived a “better life.” The psychological consequences of choosing prostitution were far reaching; depression, disassociation,

¹⁰The rebirth of multipartism in Bamenda in the 1990s was accompanied with civil unrests, ghost towns and a boycott of all economic activities. These constraints placed a large portion of the socio-economic fabric at unprecedented levels of uncertainty and instigated an urgency to be self-employed as insurance to risky, uncertain situations

¹¹The series of violent demonstrations that took place in the urbanity equally brought pressure to bear on the socio-economic lives of many inhabitants.

¹²Interview with Anita Siri, aged 33, sex worker, Mobile Nkwen, Bamenda, January 23, 2022.

¹³Herman, J.L., *Trauma and Recovery*, (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 33-50.

¹⁴ Van der Kolk, B., *The Body Keeps the Score*, (New York: Viking, 2014) 96-120

¹⁵Interview with BumuhNovela. aged 35, nurse at Mbingo hospital Bamenda, Bingo Hospital, March, 15, 2020

¹⁶ Interview with Josephine Sono

¹⁷ Idem

¹⁸Interview with Ethel Yefon 35+years, student, sex worker, Ndamukon Street, May, 09, 2020.

contemplations of suicide and attempts, to name a few. In conversation with one of the adherents, she admitted:

Sometimes, I don't feel like leaving my room. Few times, I have welcomed death even when I knew it was not my time. I have nerve issues that come from over thinking. But I cannot stop. I cannot return to the village and start suffering all over. It's not easy but it is better than nothing. The weight of the shame and name calling too is heavy. Some days I take it calmly, other times, I respond aggressively and threaten anyone or even fight if they dare judge me or call me names. People see you and assume they know who you are, it's unfair. Often, I take on the persona of nonchalance, after all it is who I am, is it not? I accept it even though deep inside, it's killing me.^[19]

The psychological harm associated with prostitution often proved more profound than its physical toll. Regardless of the underlying motivations, society at large and the Bamenda community in particular remained deeply critical and often harsh in its perceptions and responses to sex work. In their denunciation of what was deemed a "disgraceful" occupation, many within the community resorted to social exclusion, verbal abuse and in extreme cases, outright disownment. One interviewee grieving over the moral decadence that gripped the once conservative "moral" Bamenda, tersely noted;

The bible doesn't support prostitution. It's a sin. I don't know how our women involved themselves in this. More baffling is the fact that life was not so difficult in Bamenda as compared to other towns like Yaoundé. There were farms to toil or petty businesses to engage in. My child cannot be a prostitute while I'm alive. It's a shameful business. It's an abomination, a sign of ill luck to the family.^[20]

Public disapproval was widespread and openly expressed, deepening the stigma that left many sex workers isolated and estranged from family and friends who deemed them a disgrace. This social rejection inflicted severe psychological distress, manifesting in dissociation, anxiety, PTSD, and depression. Paradoxically, the resulting trauma often drove them further into the trade, as rejection and lack of support left them trapped in a cycle of ambivalence between the desire to quit and the need to survive. One expressed;

It is difficult to stop. I do not like it. I am not proud of it and so too my family members when they finally found out. But it gives me food; it provides for

my needs; my child is able to school and I am able to pay for my evening school classes too. The family members who mock me do not provide for me.^[21]

For many, financial equilibrium was sufficient justification; as long as they were able to break even. The cost, emotional or mental did not matter. In an effort to numb psychological pain and cope with the harsh realities of their circumstances, many resorted to substance use as a means of temporary escape.

The excessive consumption of drugs was another undeniable impact of sex commodification in the city of Bamenda. Compared to contemporary prostitution, prostitution in the 1970s and 1980s didn't involve drug consumption. It only sufficed for men like women to consume corn beer, palm wine, traditional liquor popularly called "*afoko*" or imported liquor and later, they retired to the nearest available room for a sexual encounter with women in the trade.²² Alcohol was the sole aphrodisiac, with the men consuming more than the women. However, over time, easy access to drugs, biological or medical conditions spiralled alcohol and drug consumption. As an interviewee disclosed;

When I was younger, I didn't need *mbanga* (Indian hemp). I was strong to take about seven men in the night. Over the years, times became harder, money scarce, and things grew expensive. I grew older too but I still needed money to survive. I took *mbanga* for "power" (strength). I could take about 12 men or more in a night depending on the period. If it was the festive period like Christmas, with the help of "grass" (pidgin synonym for Indian hem), I could take many men.^[23]

Money remained the overriding motivation, pursued at all costs. Easy access to black-market drugs encouraged widespread use among both workers and clients. Substances like cannabis and tramadol helped the prostitutes endure the risks and psychological strain of the work, while clients on the other hand used them to boost confidence or counter low libido. Excessive consumption certainly had grave consequences; poor health, infertility from uncontrolled contraceptive use, and addiction. For many women, dependency became a psychological trap, locking them into a cycle of self-destruction marked by mental instability and, in extreme cases, death.

Physical Impact of Sex Commodification

The prevalence of diseases constituted another critical impact of sex commodification, affecting both

¹⁹Interview with Benadette Berinyuy, aged 30, sex worker who doubles as fish seller, Ndamukon Street, Nkwen April 24, 2020.

²⁰ Interview with Theresa Bi, aged 80, farmer, Mile four-Nkwen, Bamenda, May 5, 2020

²¹ Interview with Bridget Bantang, aged 30, student and sex worker, Mile Four Nkwen, Bamenda, February 25, 2020

²²Interview with Anyere.

²³Interview with Roseline Ngong, aged 40+, sex worker, Ghana street, Bamenda, 11 April, 2022.

the women involved and the wider community. HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections such as Chlamydia, syphilis, and gonorrhea were particularly rampant. According to the Annual Medical Report of West Cameroon (1961), a survey on prostitutes recorded 2,017 cases of gonorrhea and 261 of syphilis. Data from the Buea Preventive Health Units revealed high infection rates among young, unmarried women engaged in the trade. Though drawn from Buea, these figures reflected the broader health crisis associated with prostitution in other divisions. In fact, the 1964 report on venereal diseases in Mankon as reported by the Cameroon Times read;

Alarming cases of Venereal Disease (VD) have struck the cosmopolitan town of Mankon in Mezam and medical teams have been alerted to stand by for massive raids on colleges and places believed to have infected people. Our NW Bureau Chief, Yai Martin, reports that the latest survey of health authorities has unveiled that the disease is eating deep into the fabric of the youth—mostly girls believed to be the main agents...At a health committee meeting recently, DrYongbang expressed concern about the high rate of the disease with women as agents. [24]

Clearly, the spike of VD was a cause for alarm in the NW region. Little wonder that this rise most likely influenced government's decision to sanction the practice when it passed the law against prostitution in the penal code in 1972. [25] In addition, the AIDS scourge that sprung in the late 80s and intensified in the 90s orchestrated a moral panic, deep intergenerational conflicts, social chaos, intense contestation and debates over female sexual morality in the sojourn. Once again, beyond the patriarchal, gender relations and power lens, women underwent scrutiny, becoming the "moral icons of morality to the society" as Permuntta puts it. [26] The shame and blame game worsened, prostitutes suffered physical violence, disassociation, severe abuse and stigma as it was alleged that they were the main carriers and distributors of the HIV/AIDS. As the most explicit way of policing female sexuality, conservatives among the *Ejaghams* for instance intensified the ritual of female circumcision as a useful antidote to the HIV/AIDS threat

[27]causing "deviant" women to flee into towns like Bamenda to escape the predicament where they persisted in the practice. Suffice to say that some of these women were apathetic to death. One prostitute interviewed had this to say:

Sick bedey but man for do how? Poverty bedey too. I know be want die poverty and man no be get capital for start business. sometime we bedi protect waselves, other time them we no doam. A know say e no bi correct because sick bi plenty for outside, but thank God say drugs them be dey too, and free too, man no fit die e fit take drug dem fine but man fit die poverty (excerpt of a pidgin English conversation with Bi Immaculate).[28]

"We were conscious of the illnesses, but poverty was more biting. What choice did I have? I did not have starting capital for a business. Sometimes, we protected ourselves, other times we did not. I know it was not safe given the prevalence of diseases but thank God, there are drugs (antiretroviral drugs). We can take drugs and survive AIDS, moreover they drugs are free, but we cannot survive hunger." (Translation, Juliet N. Bessem)

Clearly the fear of death was secondary to poverty. Survival was the most primeval concern. [29]Although in the years ahead, efforts were made by private institutions and affiliated associations such as the New Life Club [30] in sensitizing and providing contraceptives in a bid to mitigate the practice, some prostitutes remained adamant. Some boycotted checkups and a hand few dismissed the help offered through sensitization or treatments. [31]As one of the prostitutes nonchalantly admitted; "*I don already condemn, a di go small time,*" "*man weh e don fall for ground nodi fear grave,*" (I'm old already, I will be dying soon.) [32]

Socio-Economic Impact of Sex Commodification

Despite its moral and legal controversies, prostitution in the Bamenda city generated some benefits. It offered women a measure of financial independence and empowerment within a restrictive socio-economic setting. Following the 2003 adoption of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women, several

²⁴ Cameroon Times, "V.D. in Mankon Raid Teams Alerted," Vol.14, No. 37, May 1974.

²⁵NAB File NoNo. 87 "Penal Code Book 1 and 2", 63.

²⁶Ngambouk Vitalis Permuntta; "Challenging Patriarchy; Trade, Outward Migration and the Internationalization of Commercial Sex among the Banyang and Ejagham Women in South West Cameroon," *Health Culture and Society* 1, No. 1 (2001), 168

²⁷Ibid 168

²⁸Interview with Bih Immaculate, aged 40, sex worker, Mobile-Nkwen, Bamenda, 10 March, 2020.

²⁹ Nixon. K. Takor and Juliet .N. Bessem, "Pliability of Female Sexual Commodification in the City of

Bamenda" *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol 5, No. 1, 2001, 19

³⁰ New Life Club is an affiliate agency to the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Service created out of the initiative to reduce the prevalence of HIV aids among sex workers. As responsibilities, it organizes counselling sessions, offers protection, ensures that regular visits for checkup and drugs are frequently done by prostitutes among others.

³¹Interview with Bumuh.

³²Interview with Bih

organizations emerged to educate and protect women in the trade, promoting awareness of their rights and safety. [33] These associations worked tirelessly sensitizing women in general and prostitutes in particular, to make a better outcome of their profession. Although prostitution remains criminalized, its economic influence was undeniable. Thanks to the efforts of these agencies, many prostitutes made a somewhat successful living out of the business. While some took up petty businesses, others sponsored their children to school, an opportunity they did not have due to financial constraints. As one interviewee sadly expressed:

I did not go to school, but my child is going to school. I would make sure she gets all the education possible. My life choice was not the best. I regret joining the business but I'm happy I used some of the money I made to start roasting fish. I have been playing my *njangi* and paying my daughter's fees...I advise her all the time. I will make sure she never takes the path I took. [34]

Such were the results of agencies like the New life Club of the Cameroon Baptist Convention. These associations were able to maintain some degree of solidarity and unity amongst adherents as well as kept them consciously aware of their choices and how they could better improve on them. [35]

Sex commodification also served as a significant avenue for wealth accumulation for both households and communities. Though no concrete data exist on remittances, the trade's persistence and profitability suggests its embeddness in local economies. [36] Many prostitutes, having made some money, travelled often between the bigger towns of Douala and Yaoundé where the activity was relatively rife and more financially secured. To compensate, they sent back money home to their families and friends who helped them invest or catered to other impending responsibilities. Others returned home and engaged in long-term investments. Permunta observes that such entrepreneur-sex-workers often shifted occupations after accumulating capital to open bars, saloons, or provision stores. [37] Similarly, Kempadoo [38] notes that sex work is not always a permanent activity but part of a cyclical pattern of income generation while Brennan,

[39] conceptualizes this mobility as a "sexual labour continuum" where women move in and out of the sex trade depending on economic pressures. Some disguised their businesses, operating stores or bars during the day and brothels by night, demonstrating resilience and economic adaptability amid moral and structural constraints.

From an emotional stance, some sexual transactions evolved to long term unregistered marriages or *come we stay* as it was popularly called in local parlance and these in turn provided more security and stability enabling prostitutes to build relatively sustainable homes and lifestyles. Others had long-term sponsors to whom they were committed to. In return, the sponsors materially supported them, reemphasizing the difference between transactional sex and prostitution. Hunter notes that both transactional sex and prostitution involve multiple partner sexual networking, underscored by the exchange of gifts or cash. But transactional sex, he maintains, differs significantly from prostitution: participants construct each other as ("deuxième bureau"), "mistress", "boyfriend and girlfriend" and not "prostitute" and client" where "the exchange of gifts for sex is part of a wider set of obligations that might not involve a predetermined payment. [40] Again, this speaks to the complexity of the business, however, for what is worth, the former can be delineated to be an evolution or a subset of the business.

Women involved in prostitution often developed strong bonds and familial networks as survival strategies. Within these circles, they found acceptance, solidarity, and a sense of belonging that was frequently denied to them by their biological families and broader society. For many, especially those from dysfunctional or abusive homes, these informal communities provided emotional support and helped mitigate feelings of shame. Together, they confronted stigma and justified their work as a means of survival; "the business that puts food on my table."

In cases of violence or abuse, they acted collectively, sometimes seeking help from private organizations like the NLC of the CBC, with whom they maintained close collaboration. When evidence of abuse

³³File No Sg/1999/1 "North West Province-A Tourist's Dream of the Millennium; The Bamenda Millennium Celebration Forum", (1999), 30

³⁴ Interview with Berinyuy, aged 32, sex worker, Ndamukong Street, Nkwen, Bamenda, April 24, 2020.

³⁵Interview with NovelaBumuh

³⁶SaheedAderinto, "Prostitution and Urban Social Relations" in *Nigerian's Urban History; Past and Present*, ed by Hakeem I. Tijani, (Lanham, Maryland; university Press of America, 2006) .21

³⁷Permunta, "Challenging Patriarchy..."181-184

³⁸Kamala Kempadoo. "The Migrant Tightrope: Experiences from the Caribbean". In, Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema.P.(Eds) 124-138. *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 3-4.

³⁹ Denise Brennan. *Love work in Sex Work (and After) Performing Love*. In *Intimacies. Love + Sex Across Cultures*. Edited. William. R. Jankowiak, 172-193. (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2008), 75.

⁴⁰ Mark Hunter *The Materiality of Everyday Sex: thinking beyond „prostitution."* *African Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2002), 100

was verified, such agencies initiated legal proceedings or investigations. However, the women rarely reported incidents directly to the police, given the criminalization of the trade. In fact, in some instances, law enforcement officers harassed or dismissed them, reinforcing their marginalization and mistrust of state institutions.

The practice of prostitution in the Bamenda city considerably boosted the informal sector. The presence of off licenses, hotels and cinemas surrounding the prostituting spots employed so many people. For instance, the popular Mobile-Nkwen in Bamenda permitted the influx and presence of petty business which could be considered, as aforementioned, long term or short term investments.^[41] Besides the main Nkwen market built in the 1990s, petty businesses such as the roasting of fish, meat and corn, cosmetic shops, kiosks with items like fruits, cigarettes, condoms, and whisky (in sachets) popularly known as “fighter” among others employed a couple of people, greatly sustaining and increasing their living standards. Such businesses were either established by the sex workers themselves or by other daring business lovers. ^[42] To say the least, Vendors, hawkers and shop owners within these premises sold by day and by night. ^[43]

From the early 2000s, motorbikes, another source of employment, began gaining steam in the sojourn. Bikes became useful employment as well as transportation tools for riders, prostitutes, clients and generally, those who worked or sold around the red-light district spots. The economic gain was obvious, the risk notwithstanding. To have a feeling of the economic benefits of prostitution in the Bamenda urbanity especially to those of the transport sector, Eric Yuyun a bike rider said the following:

As a bike rider for close to 15 years in Bamenda, I preferred working by night mostly around areas where prostitutes worked. This was because of the possibility of having clients either coming in or going back home at a faster rate. Many people left bars drunk and were ready to pay any amount to return to their homes. In one night, I could earn an amount close to twenty thousand francs CFA ^[44]

These riders therefore played a crucial role in ensuring the relative safety and mobility of prostitutes, clients and the community at large, particularly at night.

⁴¹ Visitors, tourists made use of these facilities and at night entertained themselves with the company of prostitutes. The constant flow of people encouraged these petty businesses as they provided the latter with basic needs.

⁴² Interview with Ngulah.

⁴³ The most ideal time for business was in the evenings when people were normally done with a day's tasks and wanted to relax.

Collectively, these interlinked activities revitalized the informal economy and contributed to reducing unemployment in the city of Bamenda.

The tourism sector equally played a significant role in sustaining the sex economy of the Bamendacity. Many tourists and transient visitors sought sexual gratification in these areas, finding it easier to engage with prostitutes than with local women. According to one respondent, “having one tourist per night was better than sleeping with twenty local men a day,” ^[45] a statement that underscored the substantial economic gains derived from such encounters. Beyond financial benefits, interactions with tourists often came with additional material rewards, as visitors were typically more generous and economically well-off than local clients. ^[46]

Without any empirical studies to ascertain the employment opportunities which stemmed from the practice of prostitution in the city of Bamenda, it is however logical to conclude from the aforementioned that the trade functioned as a significant source of livelihood. Those who operated businesses around the red-light zones or engaged in related activities benefited directly or indirectly from the sector. As Yuyun aptly observed, many inhabitants of Bamenda depended on these sites for their daily sustenance; “bread to eat, water to drink, and shelter for cover.” ^[47]

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of sex commodification in the Bamenda city reveals a complex tapestry of stigma, survival and resilience. While the trade offers many women a means of economic sustenance and, for some, social mobility, it simultaneously exposes them to deep psychological wounds, health vulnerabilities, and social exclusion. The contradictions between moral proscriptions, economic necessity, and societal hypocrisy illustrate the enduring tension between survival and respectability in a context shaped by both sacred tradition and capitalist modernity. Ultimately, the persistence of prostitution in the region underscores the urgent need for nuanced interventions, those that move beyond moral condemnation to address structural poverty, gender inequity, and the lack of decent employment. In recognizing the women not merely as victims but as agents navigating constrained choices, this study calls for a more empathetic and multidimensional

⁴⁴ Interview with Eric Yuyun, aged 40, bike rider, Ghana street, Bamenda, March 15, 2020.

⁴⁵ Interview with Beatrice Ngum, aged 34, sex worker, T. Junction Bamenda, April 19, 2020.

⁴⁶ Idem

⁴⁷ Interview with Eric Yuyun

understanding of sex commodification as both a symptom and a critique of broader socio-economic realities in contemporary Cameroon.

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