

A MIGRANT AMONG OTHERS: THE “PROSTITUTE” CATEGORY IN BOLIVIAN STATISTICS

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Abstract

Nowadays, the exercise of prostitution is almost always linked to migration and mobility. These displacements and the human dramas they involve are usually analyzed from the perspective of trafficking and coercion. However, these aspects do not determine all migration flows in Bolivia, where the sex trade is a rather marginal outcome of traffic. Taking into account the socio-demographic characteristics (age, education level and mobility) of the people lawfully practicing prostitution in Bolivia (mostly women), we intend to trace migration-related behaviors of economically active women in this country. This is not just to understand the territorial configuration of the sex trade, but also to restore some social features to a category of people who tend to fade behind prejudices.

Keywords: Bolivia, sex workers, migration, prostitution, life strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the exercise of prostitution is almost always linked to migration and mobility. Given approaches to this phenomenon over the past century and the human tragedies they entail (Schettini, 2005), these flows have been mostly analyzed from the perspective of traffic and direct coercion. However, these aspects do not determine all migration flows in Bolivia, where human traffic supplies a rather marginal portion of the sex market.

Taking into account the socio-demographic characteristics (age, education level and mobility) of the people lawfully practicing prostitution in Bolivia (mostly women), we intend to trace migration-related behaviors of economically active women in this country. This is not just to understand the territorial configuration of the sex trade, but also to restore some social features to a category of people who tend to fade behind prejudices.

Data for this research were drawn from individual registry forms developed by medical staff at the clinics of the national STD/HIV-AIDS program,¹ where sex workers² must update their mandatory health book every week. Ethnographic fieldwork allowed us to refine the analysis.

AGAINST SOCIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

Until a short time ago, Bolivian prostitutes had to wear the black shawl that characterized photographic police records of the 1930s as a distinctive garment (Paredes-Candía, 1998). At the end of the 1990s they remained cloistered; even today, brothels are assigned particular

1. Many thanks to those responsible for the STD/HIV-AIDS programs and the Departmental Health Services (SEDES) who allowed us to carry out this census.

2. Women who prostitute themselves in Bolivia began to adopt, toward the end of the 1990s, the designation of “sex workers” under the auspices of the national health services, which followed the usage of multilateral organizations such as UNAIDS and the International Labour Organization (ILO). In Bolivia, brothels are legal but prostitution itself is not inscribed in the framework of the General Labor Law. Regardless of ideological debate, we use the term “sex worker” to establish prostitution within the labor market, and employ the terms “prostitute” or “whore” to refer to social structures.

areas within cities. These measures fall within the framework of a policy of regimentation³ that seeks to regulate prostitution by placing a tangible boundary between prostitutes and "decent people."

This segregation implies that prostitutes are, by nature, different from other women. Physical anthropologists of the 19th and 20th centuries studied their bodies (face and sexual organs measurement, hairiness, etc.) for natural traces of their propensity to trade in sex (Lombroso [1895], 1991; Dorlin, 2003). Psychologists, for their part, tried to match these body traits with mental disorders. Of course there were also economic explanations, but there still had to be something irreducible about external factors that would explain why some women took the step and others did not.

Approaches to this have changed and analyses on prostitution now put greater emphasis on the source socio-economic context, while psychological factors are no longer seen as part of a biological heritage but of family history. However, the idea that there is something peculiar to prostitutes that the human sciences could reveal still persists.

Sociologists long ago discarded the idea that transgressive acts such as prostitution, which defy hegemonic social standards, must necessarily be understood in relation to the personal characteristics of those who practice them (Howard Becker [1963], 2009). In fact, transgression is not an intrinsic quality of the act or the actor, but what is understood as legitimate or not in a given context. Thus, options that for some demonstrate the failure of the socialization of primary groups, such as theft or prostitution, can be otherwise understood as rational choices employed to deal with a particular situation (Kessler, 2004: 31). For this reason, the only shared trait we will find among all those who commit the same "transgression" is to be identified as transgressors; in the case that concerns us, this means to be "labeled" prostitutes and have appropriated this identity in one way or another (Becker, *ibid.*).

3. That is, the legal recognition of brothels. In Bolivia, brothels are regulated by municipalities that grant permits and monitor compliance with requirements such as taxation, the exclusion of minors, and up-to-date health books. These regulations do not imply the recognition of employees as workers backed by the general Labor Law (see note 2).

Focusing analyses on the characteristics of individuals (either personal or social) involves neglecting the specific socio-political context in which they come to life. It is clear, on the other hand, that studies that adopt this view tend to conceive female sexuality as something at the service of supposedly natural male needs and restrict women's access to similar resources. In fact, among the almost 2,500⁴ people registered by our research team, we only identified 35 men,⁵ too few to be isolated in the analysis. In addition to reflecting the extant demand (most of the clients are heterosexual men), these numbers also speak of the gap between women's growing demand for work and the lack of opportunities the labor market provides them. In Bolivia, this phenomenon has significantly increased the number of prostitutes over the past 20 years. However, most research does not go beyond articulating individual trajectories to factors that are in no way universal—in the Bolivian case, a lack of institutional services that help women through difficult moments, changes in the social fabric, or the increasing pressure of living and consumption standards related to urbanization.

Such parameters, and the many others set forth in prostitution studies, do not act similarly or simultaneously in individual trajectories, making it impossible to generalize some isolated variables and even recurring reasons that lead individuals to take this step: while many women who work as prostitutes come from poor homes or have been victims of family violence, these factors do not determine prostitution in themselves. The extrapolation of valid bonds at a macro level to explain individual facts is very problematic, as has been demonstrated for the link between unemployment and crime (Kessler, 2004). To note, conversely, that the statistical data do not always allow us to distinguish people who prostitute themselves from those who do not, does not mean we need to return to individual psychological biases such as that of the hysterical prostitute, the “crazy woman” of the popular imaginary. Prejudices such as “hormonal problems,” “nymphomania,” “laziness,” or a “penchant for pleasure” continue to foster the idea that some

4. We analyzed 2,474 records.

5. These were homosexual youths who prostituted themselves occasionally, as well as some transvestites (especially in Cochabamba and Santa Cruz).

women are meant to be “whores” without questioning their voluntary adjustment to this social category.

Entry into prostitution is different for each case and, thus, cannot be generalized. Factors involve larger social structures (e.g., the place society assigns women regarding male sexuality, the family, education, and the labor market), historical national contexts (public policy, social processes, etc.), social trajectories (origin, educational level, position in the family, age at the birth of the first child, etc.), as well as individual, unique experiences and constructs. It is this combination, aside from any statistics, reflection of broader structures, or random events, that lead some to take the step. In fact, when asked “why,” many women begin by talking about the person (childhood friend, neighbor or acquaintance, usually a woman) who introduced them to the environment, highlighting the critical importance of social networks that lie beyond any quantitative perspective. They tend to explain their situation as the result of an incident in their life, a personal crisis, rather than through broader structural factors, which is finally a characteristic of the neo-liberal context.⁶

The friends who serve as intermediaries tend to belong to (not necessarily paid) informal mechanisms⁷ rather than human trafficking operations, which imply a greater degree of duress (organized recruiter networks, confiscation of papers, forced sex, etc.). While there is indeed such traffic in Bolivia, the mechanisms of entry into prostitution that we observed during our four years of ethnographic research generally do not fall into this scheme, except for isolated cases of minors sent to establishments in Santa Cruz (the economic capital of the lowlands, close to Brazil) or other bordering countries.

Of course, the border between actual traffic and deception by employment agencies that promise things such as a “waitressing” jobs, or intermediaries who misrepresent the nature of the work by saying it

6. Given the official validation of self-employment, Bolivian individuals tend to assume that their economic situation is, first and foremost, an individual responsibility.

7. At times, local administrators send an acquaintance to search for women in the establishments of other cities (or countries). More often, however, the workers themselves act as intermediaries, and not always in exchange for a commission; prostitution is considered an economic outlet for women in difficulty who cross their path.

only entails some drinks with a male client may appear vague. However, the vast majority of women with whom we spoke knew what they were getting into or, in any case, could have turned back and did not. This enables us to make a relevant statistical comparison between sex workers and other women and, in addition, speak of labor strategies.

METHODOLOGY

The data were compiled between 2003 and 2005 and were based on the personal records of sex workers registered in the STI/HIV-AIDS programs of the nine departmental capitals of the nation, as well as the city of El Alto.⁸ Most work in brothels and nightclubs, where the health book is subject to regular controls, but our data also includes street workers and those recruited through newspapers and those who attend medical examinations. In fact, a single individual can oscillate between these various strategies.

The available information does not allow us to follow the records from one year to another to monitor or estimate annual entry into prostitution. In addition, the information may be quite incomplete for some years, and double entries might occur when a person is registered in several places. For this reason, the sample is not related to the total number of people engaged in prostitution in Bolivia. It is a quantitative estimate for a relative study between cities. Given the characteristics of the records and the large amount of “clandestine” workers in non-official circuits or provinces far removed from STI/HIV-AIDS offices, it is impossible to establish the number of sex workers.⁹ These people

8. The information varies greatly from one city to another. Generally, records indicate name, date of birth or age, workplace, educational level and geographical origin. However, while some recorded department of birth or the name of the village, others contained photocopies of the ID cards that contain more specific data—particularly, the name of the municipality; for this reason, the place of origin was registered at the provincial level (an intermediate enough category to get a good idea of spatial distribution) since the name of the municipality was not always indicated.

9. To provide a rough sense of scale, in intermediate cities such as Sucre, Tarija, or Potosí (which have from 140,000 to 170,000 inhabitants), there are about ten legal brothels shared by 100 to 150 women. These figures are higher, of course, in areas such as La Paz, El Alto and Santa Cruz, which have closer to a million inhabitants.

also do not appear in our study, which leaves out much of the national territory. However, the great mobility of sex workers across the country enables us to establish the representative nature of the sample.

The ethnographic research is based on observations and interviews carried out between 2005 and 2009, primarily in Potosí and Sucre. Some 40 life stories allowed us to fine-tune the analysis of quantitative data.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL ORIGIN OF SEX WORKERS

The vast majority of registered sex workers were born in urban areas (see Map 1): 64.7% come from a departmental capital, 41% from municipalities of over 500,000 inhabitants, and 70% from municipalities of over 50,000 people. Birthplace distribution shows a clear concentration around Santa Cruz and the La Paz/El Alto agglomeration, with 43% of workers. In fact, this distribution largely reflects the geographical distribution of the total female population (Pereira and Montano, 2004).

Confirming that prostitution in urban areas is often carried out by urban native women contradicts the idea that it is rural areas that supply the brothels. On the other hand, there is evidence of a link between place of birth and proximity to a large city: provinces that lie far away from large urban centers (most notably in the Highlands and Chuquisaca valleys) provide almost no sex workers. The proximity of a sex market where information circulates seems essential for entry into prostitution.

Map 1 shows the distribution of the number of registered sex workers according to province of birth; the gray indicates the ratio for each province, between this number and the female population of the same age range (expressed per thousand). These data lead to the following observations:

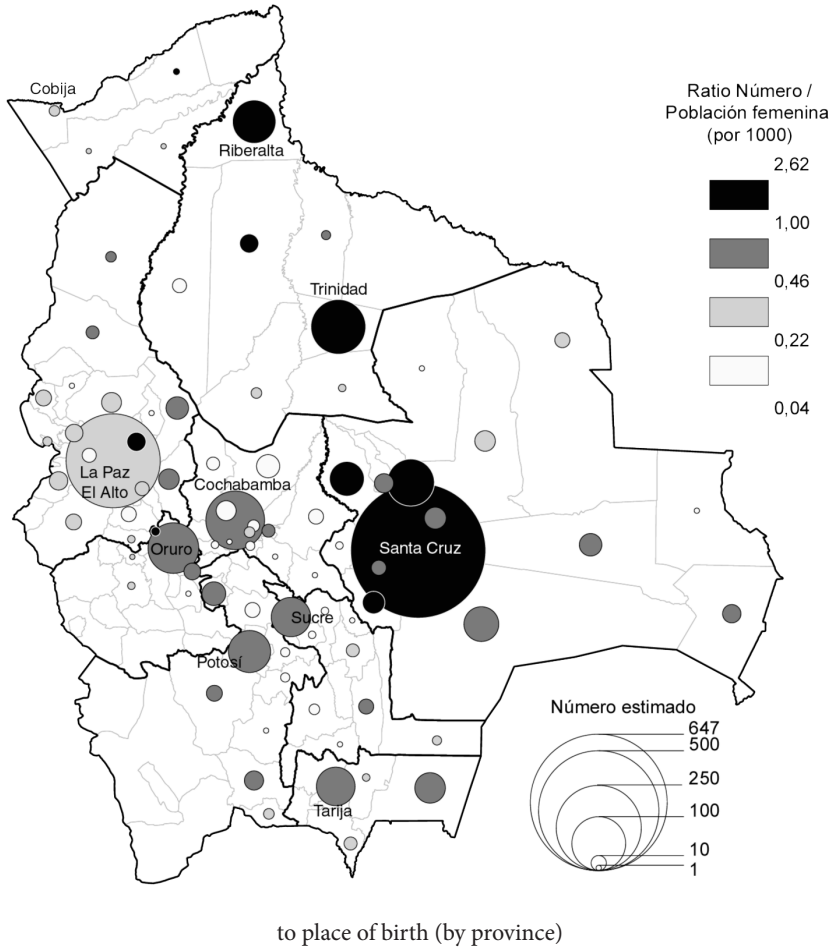
- The first has to do with the distribution ratio (sex workers/total number of women) in department capitals. We can see an average ratio—around 0.46 per thousand—in most of the department capitals, but with two peculiarities in distribution: a lower ratio in the case of La Paz/El Alto, and an important ratio for the cities of the lowlands (Santa Cruz, Trinidad, Ribalta). Thus, this ratio shows a higher

tendency to enter prostitution in Santa Cruz than La Paz.

- As far as provinces are concerned, the standouts are mining areas (Rafael Bustillos, Pantaléon Dalence), and commercial or border provinces (Sur Chichas, Gran Chaco, Vaca Diez or German Bush) where sex workers are over-represented in relation to the female population. We should also note the relative importance of the provinces involving land colonization, particularly the Yapacaní-El Chore area, and the provinces of Beni, Northern La Paz and the Yungas. Women who work as prostitutes were usually born in regions with significant economic movement and/or that attract internal migration. Agricultural provinces are organized around strong productive specialization (mining, agricultural colonization, cross-border trade) and are, at the same time, particularly vulnerable to crises; they attract migrants during boom times and expel population when economic activity collapses. In fact, life stories show that many of the sex workers who were born in these provinces are daughters of original migrants from rural or smaller agglomerations. The cities in these provinces were stepping stones in a family migration that culminated in the big city, where the women were registered even though they were born in the provinces. This is common among the migrant population of Bolivia, for whom intermediary cities tend to serve as transition points in the migration circuit toward larger cities such as department capitals (Castro Rovira, 1996; Instituto Prisma, 2002; Ministerio de Desarrollo Sostenible y Planificación, 2002; Mazurek, 2008).
- The low proportion of women who were born in the poorest areas of the country, particularly rural ones, contradicts the hypothesis according to which the likelihood of engaging in prostitution is tied to poverty levels. There is no doubt that lack of money and economic opportunity play an essential role in the decision to enter prostitution, but this is linked to factors in the urban world such as migration, consumer promises, and potential social advancement.

In short, the city and, even more so, the big city serve as both sex market and wellspring for prostitution. Intermediary cities play a transitional role.

MAP 1:
Number of registered sex workers according



Foreign workers

Bolivia is not an attractive destination for international migrants or sex workers. In our sample, only 208 women (8.5% of the total, no men

included) came from abroad. More than half (105) are Brazilians that work in Cobija; most of them (89) come from Acre state. This proximity effect can be observed in other border cities that lie outside our sample.¹⁰

TABLE 1:
Number of registered foreign workers

Country	Number
Brazil	125
Argentina	26
Peru	21
Ecuador	14
Paraguay	11
Colombia	5
Chile	1
Cuba	1
TOTAL	208

Registered foreign workers come from the countries surrounding Bolivia, with the exception of Ecuador, Colombia and Cuba. In these cases, the women we were able to interview said that their stay in Bolivia was intended as a stage in a migration process towards more economically promising destinations, such as Chile. Their life histories also show that the vast majority of foreigners did not start prostituting themselves in Bolivia but already practiced it prior to migration. This may explain why the age of foreign workers is relatively higher than that of Bolivians. Out of 100 workers whose date of birth is available,

10. E. Roth and E. Fernandez (2004) identify three cross-border migration routes from Brazil. One originates in Acre, in the cities of Rio Branco, Brasiléia, Epitassolândia and Assis Brasil, to finish in Cobija. The second links the state of Rondônia, and the cities of Porto Velho, Presidente Medici, Cerejeiras and Guajará Mirim, with Guayaramerín. The third route links to Cuiabá and Cáceres, in the state of Mato Grosso, to San Matías, in the Department of Santa Cruz; and Campo Grande, Miranda and Corumbá, in the state Mato Grosso do Sul, with Puerto Suárez, in the Department of Santa Cruz. In the case of Argentina, the most notorious border crossing points are Pocitos-Yacuiba, Oran-Bermejo and La Quiaca-Villazón.

eight were born before 1970, while 20 were born before 1977; i.e., 28% were older than 30 (a percentage of 13% for Bolivians). Conversely, only 9 (all of them Brazilians working in Cobija) were younger than 20. Birth dates show flows occurred at different times depending on the country of origin and, thus, national context; for example, all registered Ecuadoreans are older than 25, while all the Paraguayans are younger.

Brazil, Argentina and Peru, where most of the foreign workers come from, were also destinations for the few Bolivians who have done sexual work abroad. At the time of the survey, Spain had become the main target for international migration candidates, and not always with prostitution in sight.

The interior cities that receive the most foreign workers are Santa Cruz (with 51) and, to a lesser extent, La Paz (18) and Cochabamba (15). Life stories show that the owners of the more "prestigious" establishments travel or send someone abroad, especially to Brazil, to recruit workers. Foreign women are an important added value: the word spreads that some "foreigners" just came in, it doesn't matter from where, and customers begin to dream about promises of exoticism. This fantasy is fully attached to black women, who comprise almost all the Colombians and Ecuadoreans who have moved to work in Bolivia. Their popularity might compensate for the weak value of the national currency vis-à-vis living standards in their countries of origin.

In addition to the comings and goings of the women who work near the borders of their countries of origin, to which they often return, we also see time-specific cross-border migrations, like those of the Brazilians arriving in time for Carnival. Those who settle in Bolivia tend to follow the internal migration pattern of their Bolivian colleagues, which explains the presence of foreigners throughout the country.

WHERE DO THEY WORK?

Since the end of the cloistered regime during the 1990s, sex workers may freely change workplaces. This results in frequent trips that allow them to try their luck in other cities when business declines, customers get "bored" of seeing the same faces, or the women want to discover new horizons. There is a tacit rule that distances them from the city where

they were born: the fear of being discovered by relatives or acquaintances. Registry data shed some light on these nomadic patterns.

The following table shows the ratio between the number of sex workers registered according to place of work and the local reference population (urban women between 20 and 34 years of age).

The ratio shows the strong attraction posed by mining cities—Potosí and Oruro—confirming sex workers' capacity to follow economic flows. We must note that our years of reference (2004-2005) correspond with the international rise in mineral prices, when hundreds of lone men arrived at the mines in addition to the regulars. Life stories show that coca leaf cultivation played a similar role at the beginning of 2000, when it fostered sex trade in settlement areas, especially in the tropics of the Chaparé.

Tarija, Trinidad and, above all, Cobija, which also have a much higher than the average ratio of sex workers, are more difficult to interpret given the low sample size. The attraction might have to do with their status as transition cities: a pioneer point, in the case of Trinidad, and trans-border locality in the two other cases.

TABLE 2:
Number of registered sex workers, number of urban women
20 to 34 years of age, and ratio according to place of work

PLACE OF WORK	NUMBER OF REGISTERED SEXUAL WORKERS	URBAN WOMEN AGED 20 TO 34	RATIO PER THOUSAND
Potosí	311	17240	18,0
Cobija	26	2599	10,0
Trinidad	87	9424	9,2
Oruro	237	26448	9,0
Sucre	120	27943	4,3
Tarija	88	19276	4,6
Santa Cruz	686	162839	4,2
Cochabamba	205	73249	2,8
La Paz	305	114258	2,7
El Alto	198	88887	2,2
GENERAL TOTAL	2121	542163	3,9

MOBILITY

The following tables and figure show some features regarding the mobility of sex workers between place of birth and place of work. The first is the central role played by migration: almost 68% of registered women work in a department other than that of origin. To this is added a figure of 17.9%: women born in the same department but another city (Table 3). For the majority of women who come from cities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants (approximately 50% of the sample), prostitution implies residence in a city larger than that of origin. This finding confirms the urban character of prostitution.

TABLE 3:
Origin of sex workers according to city of work

CITY OF WORK	% BORN OUTSIDE THE DEPARTMENT	% BORN IN THE SAME DEPARTMENT BUT ANOTHER CITY	% BORN IN THE SAME CITY
Sucre	84,3	7,8	7,8
La Paz	49,8	12,5	37,7
El Alto	37,4	62,1	0,5
Cochabamba	80,0	16,1	3,9
Oruro	83,1	4,2	12,7
Potosí	90,5	5,6	3,9
Tarija	69,3	13,6	17,0
Santa Cruz	30,6	20,6	48,8
Trinidad	67,1	18,8	14,1
Cobija	84,6	11,5	3,8
AVERAGE	67,7	17,9	14,5

Figure 1 shows two pieces of information: The proportion of women who were born in the city where they were working during the years of research (more than 33% in the case of the thick circle, between 10% and 33% for the thinner circle, and less than 10% for the rest of the cities). The

arrows symbolize flows between cities: very significant flows (according to Table 4) show as thick arrows; significant flows as finer ones, and important but not statistically significant flows show as dotted arrows.

- Born in the same city
- Between 10 and 33%
- Important flow, significant
- Medium flow, significant
- Medium flow, not significant

FIGURE 1:
Sex worker migration flows between cities.

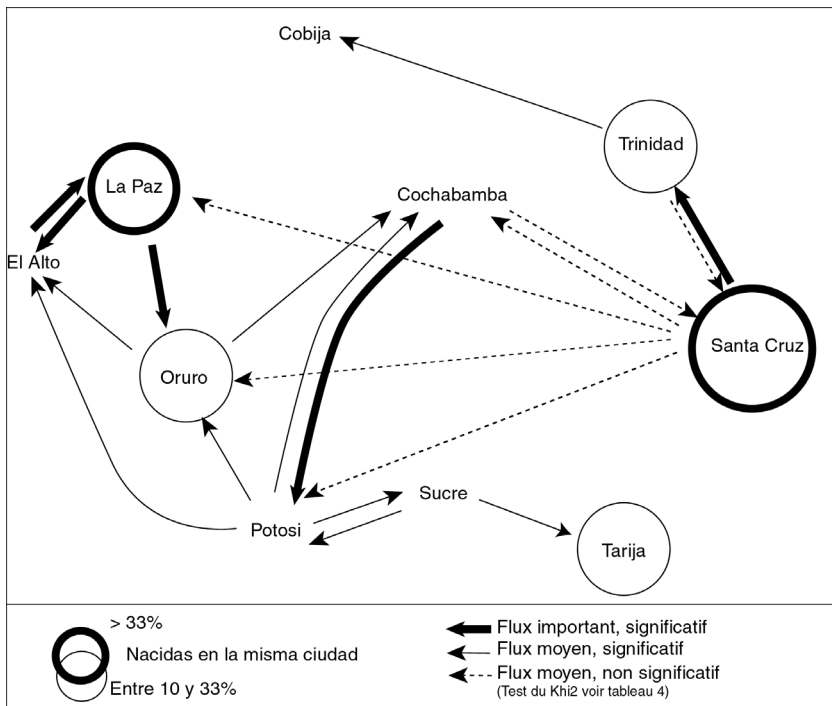


TABLE 4:
Mobility between place of birth and place of work

DEPARTMENT OF BIRTH	CITY OF WORK										WHO WORK OUTSIDE	
	SUCRE	LA PAZ	EL ALTO	COCHABAMBA	ORURO	POTOSÍ	TARIJA	SANTA CRUZ	TRINIDAD	COBIJA		TOTAL
Chuquisaca	18	7	4	5	4	15	7	23	0	0	83	78,3
La Paz	14	153	124	34	73	35	4	31	0	0	468	40,8
Cochabamba	8	25	7	41	22	40	6	50	3	0	202	79,7
Oruro	4	8	14	15	40	12	3	11	1	0	108	63,0
Potosí	17	9	12	18	20	29	5	17	2	0	129	77,5
Tarija	2	7	2	9	4	14	27	28	3	0	96	71,9
Santa Cruz	47	74	23	66	59	127	32	476	48	0	952	50,0
Beni	5	22	10	15	15	34	4	50	28	22	205	86,3
Pando	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	4	8	50,0
Total	115	305	198	205	237	306	88	686	85	26	2251	
Born outside	84,3	49,8	37,4	80,0	83,1	90,5	69,3	30,6	67,1	84,6		%

An analysis of the migration chart and Table 4 allows us to observe the following:

- There is a greater tendency for women to work where they were born if the place has a large sex market and can provide anonymity. More than 50% of women who were born in the departments of Santa Cruz and La Paz work in capitals of the same department. There is also a significant proportion of local-born workers in Oruro, Tarija and Trinidad.
- Three systems of mobility can be highlighted: one in the East (Santa Cruz and Trinidad), which has reduced flow from the rest of the country or expels women towards the West and the more attractive cities; a Western system (La Paz-El Alto-Oruro) that receives women

and only expels a few; a central system (Cochabamba-Potosi-Sucre) characterized by its strong connection to other cities, and where the majority of women come from somewhere else.

- The third feature, indicated by the cells highlighted in gray,¹¹ has to do with migratory direction and privileged destinations. These are almost always in proximity. For example, sex workers born in Oruro tend to be found in El Alto, Cochabamba and Oruro; the same is observed for those from Potosí, who tend to end up in Sucre. This means that mobility is directed towards the largest cities near the place of birth.

The choice of cities connected by direct modes of transport to places of origin has to do with family logistics typical of migration contexts. Most of the sex workers have children who are left in the care of their maternal grandparents;¹² the choice of place of work therefore combines the economic opportunities offered by the target market with the preservation of a strong bond with the place of origin to which the women regularly return to rest and engage in family life.

However, sex workers' mobility patterns differ in relation to the overall migration trends (Mazurek, 2008). The little attraction posed by Santa Cruz, which is quite appealing for general migrants hailing from other large cities in the country, is surprising. Given its important sex market, the relatively low migration from other departments seems offset by the fact that almost half of women who prostitute themselves in this city were born there (48.8%, against less than a 14.5% average for the other cities in the country; see Table 3). Conversely, the strong attraction of Oruro and Potosí which, in general, tend to expel population, is explained by the strong effects of mining.

The formation of a migration "basin" around El Alto (migration from neighboring municipalities), the unpopularity of La Paz, and the

11. The data in these cells show a chi-squared value over 1, which means there is a statistically significant relationship. For an explanation of Pearson's chi-squared test, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pearson%27s_chi-squared_test.

12. The youngest children often accompany their mothers, who entrust them to nannies while they work or rest. However, when they become old enough to attend school, they can no longer keep moving with their mothers. Some women settle while others entrust the children to relatives.

transitional nature of Cochabamba are features common to general Bolivian migration (Mazurek, 2008).

Mobility does not begin with prostitution

Going where the market is, being seduced by promises of the big city, or trying to escape prying are not concerns exclusive to sex workers. In fact, out of the 41 life stories we collected, 31 belonged to women (one of them Chilean and another Ecuadorian) who had left their birthplace before entering prostitution. At least seven had migrated twice or more, one of them to Peru. During their first migration, 13 had left their family home to go to live with a brother or uncle; six took jobs as housemaids; four accompanied their parents, and four their husbands; four more had escaped to "fend for themselves": two from the parental home and another from an orphanage. These figures leave no doubt as to the weight of previous migration experience prior to prostitution, more so if we considering that most of the sex workers are daughters of migrants (i.e., they were born in a city and or a different department than that of their parents).

The economic nature of these previous migrations is evident: go to live with other relatives can mean a desire to break with the parents, but also a search for economic autonomy that leads to a job. Generally speaking, neither uncles nor brothers bear the full costs of the migrant; half of these migrations are linked to a search for job opportunities. The subsequent entry into prostitution and nomadism are among the economic strategies of the female population in general. Entry into prostitution can attest to the difficulties encountered by female migrants in their attempts to achieve their economic goals given both their vulnerability and the freedom enjoyed by those young women who have escaped the surveillance of their parents. Previous migration also helps maintain the sense of anonymity required for sexual work. In fact, out of the 31 women who had already migrated prior to prostitution, 19 had begun working in this field in the city where they lived at the time. In this sense, some women enter prostitution in a city other than that of origin, even if they have lived there after a first migration. The

role played by bus stations in departmental capitals, which serve as connection spots for isolated migrants working in prostitution (Aillón, Campos and Domic, 2002), confirms migratory links.

It is worth noting that 25 of the interviewed women had prior experience of receiving patronage in exchange for sexual favors while working in a house or restaurant. These jobs have the great advantage of providing economic and educational capital in addition to accommodation, as well as financial support from the employer (advance payment, gifts), with whom the relationship also tends to entail emotional investment. These conveniences, critical in a migration situation, are very similar to those offered in a brothel, and this facilitates the movement from one job to another. Employers are replaced by clients who can solve the migrant's immediate problems, while brothels always have available jobs.

Are all of them “cambas”?

The origin and distribution of sex workers in Bolivia questions the idea that women in Bolivian brothels are “*cambas*,” i.e., natives of the lowlands and the warm, eastern parts of the country (Santa Cruz and, to a lesser extent, Beni and Pando). Our figures (see Map 1) confirm that, in relation to the female population in general, the ratio of sex workers born in the eastern part of the country is higher than elsewhere, including the capital La Paz, which has a similar number of inhabitants as Santa Cruz. However, Tables 3 and 4 show there are no specific *cruceña* or *beniana* flows; these women follow the same migratory patterns as the others, primarily working in the large city that is closest to their place of birth.

In popular lore, the presence of *cambas* in brothels fuels traditional prejudices regarding “oriental” predispositions toward laziness, sex and easy money in a classic, imaginary correspondence between the nature of the environment and the women who inhabit it. While the tropical climate would presumably aesthetically and erotically enhance the *cambas*' body, making them “more into whores,” the austere mountains are supposed to produce rough, long-suffering women particularly suited for domestic employment.

"The *camba* is sexier, better skilled at seduction, the "*kollas*" (the women of the West) are more fragile. The *camba* wants luxury, not merely a good cot; the *camba* doesn't know how to work. The *kolla* thinks first of her children, the *camba* of her nails." Expeditious judgments such as this, by the owner of a Santa Cruz brothel, show how the popular imaginary has constructed the notions of "whore" and *camba* by contrasting them with the women from the west. Prior to becoming over-represented in brothels, *cambas* already provided a ghostly over-representation of the archetype of the prostitute.

Sex workers from both the west and east tend to have had early relationships with older men in return for gifts and with the alleged complicity of their mothers, which they interpret as a step toward prostitution. The centrality of the "misses" and other "*magnificas*" in the economic and political life of Santa Cruz (including its expressions of regionalism; Gustafson, 2006) reinforces the idea that eastern women are brought up to use their body as capital. In addition to anonymity, the easing of social control and the promises of consumption in all large cities, Santa Cruz probably has the most dynamic night life in the country. This has more to do with its economic characteristics and role as a transit city than with the "nature" of its people. The density of discos, karaokes and bars favors young girls' access to the nightlife and recruiters. In fact, out of the 15 interviewed women who were born in the Santa Cruz department, nine began working in the city of Santa Cruz; half of the women registered in it came from the same department.

The collected life stories give us another clue into understanding the greater presence of lowland women in the brothels. Slightly more than half of the interviewees (11 out of 20) began prostituting themselves before their first child was three. These are very young mothers, often underage, who raise their child alone. In addition to not having the support of the father, many became distanced from their own parents as a result of their pregnancy. It is difficult to find work with a child in arms, and few activities cover material needs at the same time as child care. Nowadays and on average, lowland women (the east and tropical valleys of La Paz) have their first child four years earlier than those in the highlands (Mazurek, 2010). In this sense, the number of pregnant teenagers, which continues to rise in the lowlands, may be related to their presence in brothels.

Although the real reasons for the presence of eastern women in the brothels has little to do with clichés, the latter have real consequences: eastern women have trouble competing with westerners in the domestic service market. In the west, this can become an excuse to explain their presence in prostitution. By favoring “*cholitas*” (women from the mountains and western valleys who wear clothing that denotes their indigenous origin) as domestic workers, employers contribute to these stereotypes. On the other hand, in addition to the more dynamic nightlife in cities such as Santa Cruz, it is the *cambas*’ erotic added value that leads recruiters to privilege the lowlands and promote the women’s origin, as can be seen in newspaper ads.

Given customer expectations regarding the greater sexual freedom of *cambas*, these women are prompted to adapt their behavior. The *camba* denomination fuels male fantasies regardless of the actual origin of the women; in fact, women from La Paz, Potosí or Chuquisaca do not hesitate to present themselves as *cruceñas* or *benianas* to increase their price. In fact, the proliferation of *cambas* in prostitution has little to do with the tropical nature of eastern women, especially if we consider that many of them are daughters of western migrants: at the time of the study, more than 25% of the population in the department of Santa Cruz came from the mountains and western valleys (UNDP; 2004). In fact, our registry showed more women born in Yapacani, a major destination for Andean migrants, than in Buena Vista, whose population tends to be native.

The power of ethnic imaginaries

When shaping the libido of customers, the distinction between *cambas* and *kollas* (along with that between women in a dress or an overskirt, Bolivian or foreign) influences the recruitment strategies of brothel owners and, therefore, the movement of women between workplaces. Any prestigious locale must have young women, especially *cambas* and foreigners, as well as some black women. Overskirt-wearing women are not found in the finer establishments, but while *cholitas* rarely fuel the fantasies of eastern men, they are highly sought after in the Andean and mining regions such as Potosí or Oruro, to the point that some “dress-wearing” women decide to adopt the overskirt as marketing strategy: they are nicknamed “the transformers.”

Two conflicting wishes orient customer libido: on the one hand, they want to share things with a woman belonging to a similar social and generational background with whom they can easily establish a certain complicity and, on the other, they desire to feel empowered by possessing a younger woman with added erotic value—i.e., a *camba* or foreigner. For this reason, the distribution of women across locales and cities cannot be understood if we do not take into account the power socio-ethnic imaginaries have over the sex trade and differential profits depending on age, origin and client fantasies.

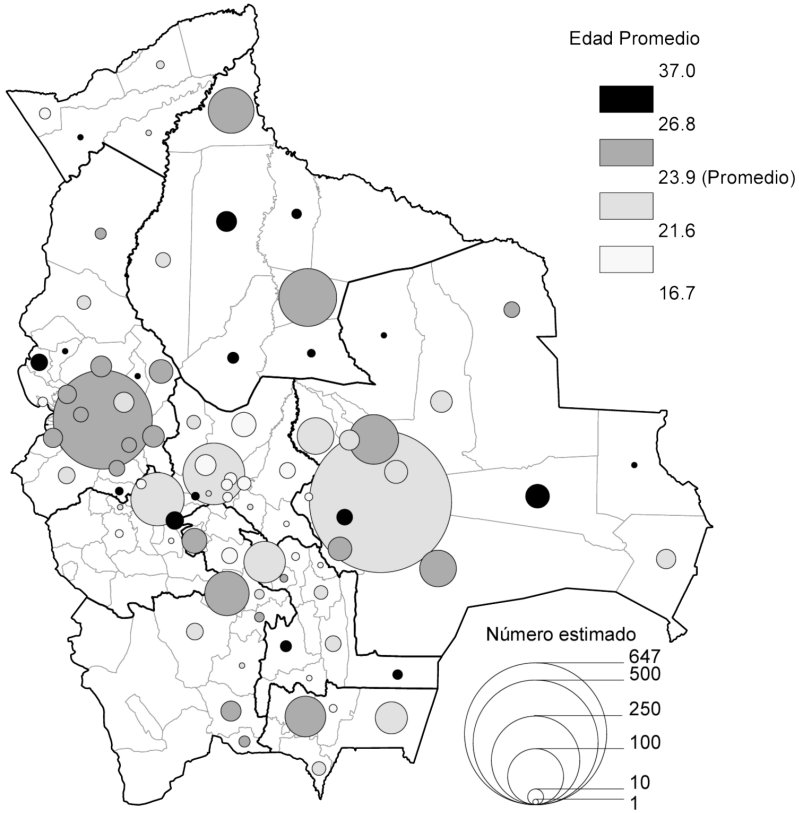
AGE AND EDUCATION

As we have already pointed out, almost all of the registered women are young: their average age is 23.9 years, with a minimum of 13 years and a maximum of 51. The presence of minors in our sample is explained by the fact that, in some cities, the women were surveyed directly on the premises and not through the registry. Since the prostitution of minors is illegal, the latter often hide from health services or falsify their papers to obtain their health book.

In Bolivia, being young does not prevent women from already having a long professional career. Life stories show the women have practiced various trades since they were 12 or 13 years old, usually as housemaids or in some business. Many tried to pursue studies at the same time. Prostitution, then, is not then their choice election in the labor market, neither is it the last. Their youth suggests there is a life after prostitution for most of them.¹³ Map 2 shows the distribution of the average age of sex workers according to their place of birth.

13. Research carried out in Potosí, Sucre and El Alto (Reyna Reyes, 2002; Amatlter, 1999; Alicia, 1996) reported that between 40% and 60% of women state they have been engaged in prostitution for less than a year. Some save money to open their own business, which is their main goal. However, age can also make it difficult for them to change jobs just as their profits start declining; then, the alternative is to find a man who can support them and/or will provide the required capital.

MAP 2:
Number of registered sex workers and average age according
to place of birth (by province)



There are significant age differences between women born in lowly populated areas (not always rural ones), where women are older, and the cities, where they are younger. Thus, women from small provinces isolated from the large migration avenues are not only less likely to enter prostitution, they also tend to do it later in life. This seems to corroborate the importance of the proximity of a sex market (usually in a large city) for entry into prostitution; women in rural areas must engage in the preliminary migration stage we have already discussed.

The provinces of the department of Cochabamba seem to be an exception given the high proportion of women who go into prostitution while quite young (in general, four years before the national average). This phenomenon can be related to Figure 1, which shows Cochabamba as a crossroads-city; its role in the formation of a "basin of migration" is evidenced by population movements in general (Hinojosa, 2004). The commercial character of this city, which attracts lots of businesspeople from small departmental municipalities, fosters an early entry into the work market and could explain early entry into prostitution.

Table 5 indicates average age according to the department of origin for women (lines) who work in capital cities (columns). Gray figures correspond to those who were born and work in the same department. The table is sorted by increasing average age and it shows that Cochabamba and Pando, though represented by a weak sample, have the youngest workers, followed by Santa Cruz and Sucre. Older women are found in mining departments or settlement areas, where locals seem to be less demanding (or not demanding at all) regarding the age of women they receive.

Table 5:
Median age of sex workers according to
department of origin and city of work

DEPARTMENT OF BIRTH	CITY OF WORK										GENERAL AVERAGE
	Cocha-bamba	Cobija	Santa Cruz	Sucre	La Paz	El Alto	Trinidad	Potosí	Oruro	Tarija	
Cobija	22,5	20				20					21,2
Cochabamba	22,8		21,5	19,7		22,2	19,3	23,5	27	20,4	22,5
Sucre	20,3		21,1	22,4	21,4	23		27,4	19	25	23,1
Santa Cruz	23,2		22,8	23,8	23	26,3	22,9	24,2	27	27,9	23,6
Oruro	20,4		23,8	24,3	25,9	23	23	27,3	23	31	23,9
Tarija	18,3		23,3	34	25,5		22,5	27,8	20	25,9	24,7
La Paz / El Alto	22,3		24,9	24,9	25	22,9		26,6	27,5	26	24,8
Trinidad	24,6		23,7	21,3	24,8	26	26,5	25,8	24,9	33,8	25,2
Potosí	26,6		25,5	23	27	26,4	20,5	24	27,4	27,3	25,3
GENERAL AVERAGE	21,5	22,2	23,1	23,4	24,1	24,1	24,2	25,1	26,4	26,5	

In most cases, there is a strong statistical relationship between the average age of entry into prostitution according to department of birth (horizontal) and the average age according to city of work (in column). However, Oruro and Tarija are unique: those who were born in these departments are, on average, three years younger than the sex workers working in the cities of the same name.

The educational level of sex workers

The average proportion of sex workers who have a basic or lower education level is 32%, which is the same as the level of the total female population of the same age (30.9%). Some spatial differences also correspond to the general population model: education levels are very low in the most rural provinces, while in cities (particularly departmental capitals) the proportion of workers with secondary education is higher and exceeds 50%. The same goes for higher education. There is, therefore, no significant difference between the educational level of prostitutes and that of the general female population in the same age range.

These findings contradict the idea that below-average education levels play a role in entrance into prostitution. Nor can it be said that migration and residence in a big city accompanied by the entry into prostitution enable women to continue studying. The pace of life and alcohol consumption in brothels, where the majority of our sample work, are hardly compatible with student obligations, nor is it easy to give up the profits of nomadism. The phenomenon of women who finance their university studies through prostitution may occur to a greater extent among occasional, unregistered sex workers who work in less conventional circuits. On the other hand, many workers support their brothers, allowing them to continue their studies.

If women have a clear educational disadvantage that might lead to low levels of remuneration in the labor market, this is not particular to sex workers; on the contrary, having achieved a certain level of schooling could play a key role in both their entry and permanence in prostitution. In a society where high school and even a higher education diploma do not guarantee secure employment, prostitution also answers

the frustrated hopes of women who cannot attain a satisfactory place in the labor market despite having a certain educational level and need a way of quickly accumulating capital.

TABLE 6:
Number of workers according to education, place of birth or place of work

DEPARTMENT	PRIMARY [BIRTH]	PRIMARY [WORK]	SECONDARY [BIRTH]	SECONDARY [WORK]	UNIVERSITY [BIRTH]	UNIVERSITY [WORK]
Chuquisaca	16	0	34		2	
La Paz	151	129	255	312	27	41
Cochabamba	66	82	107	107	14	13
Oruro	23	86	68	139	5	11
Potosí	28	117	67	190	10	4
Tarija	33	41	40	44	6	3
Santa Cruz	205	117	508	400	26	24
Beni	77	37	128	51	5	0
Pando	3	22	5	4	0	0
Total	602	631	1212	1247	95	96

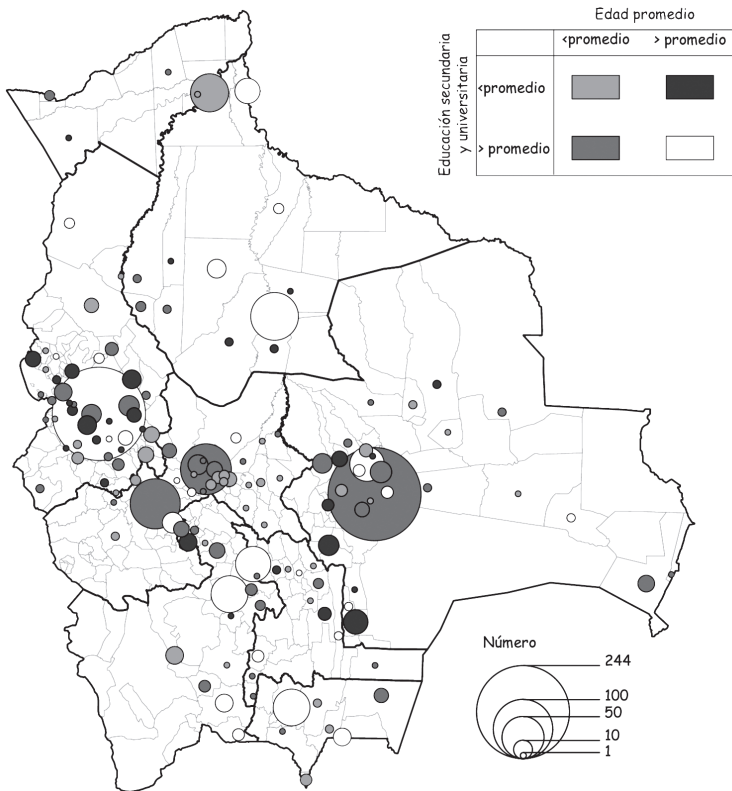
While the average educational level of sex workers does not differ significantly from that of Bolivian women in general, Table 6 shows a number of differences depending on the place of birth or of work. We have highlighted the most significant data in grey.

In the case of Oruro or Potosí, we see an important flow of immigrant women with a low education level (primary schooling) hailing from Santa Cruz or Beni. In the other departments, the balance between the two figures means there is no significant educational difference between women who migrate and those who do not. Only La Paz has a higher proportion of women with university level, which might suggest an even more selective migration of university graduates towards that area, or the improvement of educational level upon entry into prostitution. The data are, however, marginal.

The level of education can influence the place of work, as women with lower education levels travel to mining or settlement areas. This

might have to do with the territorial distribution of more or less select establishments in relation to the educational level of their workers. It can also reflect strategies prior to entry into prostitution, such as the migration of women who, having reached middle school, think they will have greater opportunities in larger cities such as La Paz or Santa Cruz.

Map 3:
Classification based on educational level and the average age according to place of birth



Map 3 shows the spatial structure in relation to the age and education level of sex workers according to place of birth. The red corresponds to women with a below-average level of education and a lower than average (orange) or higher than average (red) age. The near totality corresponds to the small, largely rural provinces. The Oruro-Cochabamba-Santa Cruz axis, in green, stands out and is associated with many small provinces that have mining or settlement activity. This means that the places with dynamic and/or critical economic activity have an earlier entry into prostitution, and that these young women already have a certain degree of education, up to middle school. They then tend to leave for larger cities in search of social advancement.

CONCLUSIONS

When studying the strategies of people who enter prostitution, an emphasis on traffic contributed to the erasure of this social group in the analysis of Bolivian migratory paths. One of the main conclusions of our study is the key role played by mobility in the lives of sex workers, a strategy that usually precedes prostitution. Many women begin prostituting themselves in cities to which they have migrated for other reasons, particularly in search of domestic employment; hoping to achieve a certain level of education; due to family reunification and, in the case of the younger ones, a desire for independence. But migration does not always meet those promises; getting the women away from the familial environment fulfills the first requirement for entry into prostitution: anonymity.

Once they are working as prostitutes, migration becomes an ongoing element. As observed in other regions of the world such as Spain (Osos Casas, 2006), the tracking of market opportunities is typical of sexual work, but it also responds to the general characteristics of migration paths in Bolivia. In this sense, prostitution is one more strategy in employment/migration interactions.

Our study shows that reasons for entry into prostitution do not depend on origin or, even less, education level; neither is it decisively caused by poverty. On the contrary, the majority of women who worked in the

cities come from urban centers and have an educational background within the national average or even higher than that of women from most rural areas. Prostitution is, then, an expression of social frustration (e.g., failed educational or migratory expectations) rather than poverty, and does not generate a marginal population (i.e., one recognizable by its social characteristics, at least not given the variables taken into account by this study). Early pregnancies and previous migration are recurring elements in the lives of sex workers. Their life stories do not reveal any shared family or personal characteristics other than having entered the business when they were in dire need of money and a roof.

As is the case for the whole of the migrant population, prostitutes move in stages. Flows into the departmental capitals do not come from rural areas but other large or intermediate cities. However, as is also the case for all general types of migration, economic dynamism makes smaller cities attractive—especially the mining areas (Potosí, Oruro), and settlement or agricultural development and border exchange areas. This migration in stages is inscribed in individual trajectories within family stories: many of the sex workers are also daughters of migrants hailing from rural areas or small villages where they were born before moving to the departmental capitals where our study found them.

Economic opportunities in destination cities combined with their accessibility in relation to place of birth (migration based on proximity) or place of residence (stage migration) draw large flows. The nomadism of sex workers remains anchored to family since, in most cases, their children live with their maternal grandparents, meaning the mothers move between easily accessed (and profitable) places. The issue is not about finding a place in which to live in the medium or long term, but to follow the economic dynamism. The final goal is usually a return to the region of origin, particularly the nearest city, where the profits are invested in building a house, making improvements to the parental home and/or a business. In this sense, the movement of sex workers is similar to that of individual emigrants who leave for Spain hoping to return with capital to invest.

Since entry into prostitution is often fostered through meetings and advice from a woman or man in the business, the choice of destination

results from an intensive exchange of information among brothels: those who arrive make recommendations (which city, which establishment), those who leave look for traveling companions; others return to entice their peers as requested by an administrator, all of which is very similar to any labor mobility process powered by the construction of imaginaries of opportunity based on the social environment (Hinojosa, 2004). This shows that entry into prostitution is not only related to workforce offer (and characteristics), but also demand.

Beyond essentialist interpretations on the "nature" of the *cambas*, the dynamism of the Santa Cruz sex market amplifies the "snowball" effect; its advantages, in comparison to the situation faced by the *cholitas*, consist of being able to work across the country. The power of imaginaries of gender, race and age in the configuration of supply and demand are confirmed in some specific markets such as the mining or highland ones, where women are, for the most part, highland natives and older. Clichés promote "young," "university educated" or *camba* women, categories displayed in newspaper ads and Internet sites. However, western women who pretend to be *cambas* and the "transformer" *cholitas* remind us that the ethno-geographic marketing is not necessarily tied to place of birth.

The migration patterns of prostitutes then follow, with some peculiarities, those of the rest of the population. There is no doubt about the link between prostitution and economic opportunity, nor of the direction of the subsequent flows. This evidence contrasts with the image of the prostitute as the passive object of foreign business, or as an irrational being using non-conventional labor strategies. Study results confirm the unfounded nature of the idea that prostitution is primarily practiced by a certain type of woman. By demonstrating the impossibility of establishing automatic correlations between variables such as schooling, poverty, ethnic-geographical origin and entry into prostitution, we can also show that prostitution is one possible element in the migratory paths of young women of a certain age.

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