

## NEGOTIATING SOCIAL SPACE: SEX-WORKERS AND THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SEX WORK IN ADDIS ABABA

Bethlehem Tekola

*Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University*

**ABSTRACT** This paper explores the social life of sex workers in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. It focuses on the social ties between sex workers and a variety of other people, such as their family members, relatives, roommates, neighbors, coworkers, and clients. It explores these social ties in terms of the way they are (1) affirmed and reinforced, (2) strained and broken, and (3) initiated and cultivated by the women as a result of their engagement in sex work. The main thesis of the work is that sex workers share the same social milieu and value system with non-sex workers and that, despite severe constraints put on them by poverty and very difficult working conditions, they struggle on a daily basis to have a social life and social relevance. The work critiques the very common castigation of sex workers as social misfits who pose dangers to society and proposes a humane approach towards them and their dependents, an approach that should begin by making a clear distinction between the institution of commercial sex and the women who practice it.

**Key Words:** Addis Ababa; Commercial sex; Sex work; Social ties; 'Prostitution'.

### INTRODUCTION

There are three principal points on which there is almost complete unanimity among the sex workers of Addis Ababa today. One of these is that sex work is a kind of work that a woman undertakes for compelling economic reasons irrespective of how she actually comes into it; it is not an occupation on which one embarks as a matter of pure choice. The other is that sex work is shameful; it is degrading to the woman herself as well as to all those she is related to. The third is that sex work is not a career of a lifetime; it is a temporary undertaking that one should get out of as quickly as possible.

Based on these three principles, this article<sup>(1)</sup> describes the ways the women<sup>(2)</sup> engaged in commercial sex interact with different sections of society. I will argue that the social personality of individual sex workers is determined by the way they try to reconcile these widely-shared principles with the reality in which they find themselves today. I will show that this effort to reconcile the principles with reality produces three different approaches, which the women employ in dealing with society. One of the approaches, which may be called *affirmative*, is one in which the women try to maintain and/or reinforce their relationship with certain people despite the disruptive nature of sex work. The second approach, which may be termed as *isolationist*, is one in which the women are compelled to limit or avoid contact, interaction, and/or social relationships with some people. The third approach, which may be referred to as *interactive*, is

one in which the women engage in active social relationships with a variety of people with whom they come into contact as part of their daily life. The three approaches are not items in a list out of which the women would choose. All of them are pursued concurrently, or at the same time. What this means is that for each woman who engages in commercial sex, life is partly about maintaining some types of previously existing social relationships (thus, affirmative); partly about temporarily moving away from some types of social relationship (thus, isolationist); and partly about creating or actively pursuing some types of social relationships (thus, interactive).

The paper has four parts. This introductory section is followed by a critical review of existing Ethiopian literature on commercial sex work. The third part illustrates the social life of commercial sex workers in Addis Ababa. It is in this section that attempts are made to identify the types of social relationships that the female sex workers tend to affirm, avoid, or pursue. I will also describe the strategies that the women employ in pursuit of their objectives and the costs/benefits involved in the strategies. The fourth part is the conclusion.

## ETHIOPIAN IMAGES AND APPROACHES TO FEMALE SEX WORKERS

Commercial sex<sup>(3)</sup> (known in the literature as prostitution) has been an important and attractive topic for sociological research in Ethiopia. Interest in the topic, which goes back to the 1960s (Mayor, 1962, 1963; Andargatchew, 1967; Lema, 1968), has increased in leaps and bounds since the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s (Laketch, 1978, 1991; Banchiyeleku, 1984; Ayehunie, 1987; Mehret, 1990; Habtamu, 1991; Baardson, 1993; Kebede, 1993; Tamene, 1993; Atakilt, 1994; Gedu, 1995; Alemayehu, 1996; Aklilu, 1998; Hussein, 1998; Seble, 1998; Mulumebet, 2000; Bethlehem, 2002, 2004a, 2004b). However, with a few outstanding exceptions, notably that of Laketch (1978, 1991), Andargatchew (1988), and Bethlehem, 2002, 2004a, 2004b), these studies displayed common characteristics in terms of themes, approaches, and conclusions.

In terms of themes, research on commercial sex in Ethiopia tended to be highly repetitive. The favorite themes or issues have been “causes of prostitution”, “types of prostitution” and “consequences of prostitution” (Alemayehu B., 1996; Alemayehu M., 1973; Banchiyeleku, 1984; Habtamu, 1991; Seble, 1998, Tamene, 1993). The same themes have been tested over and over again with an ever-increasing number of samples. It appears that this happened partly for lack of research integration, poor archival research, and/or inaccessibility of earlier research reports. Little efforts have been made to place commercial sex in the context of wider socio-economic conditions; for example, to understand the social life of commercial sex workers (for exceptions, see Laketch, 1978 and Andargatchew, 1988).

The literature is also highly repetitive in terms of approach or methodology. With very few exceptions, the most common approach consisted of case studies of often small samples of “prostitutes” through questionnaire-based struc-

tured surveys (Banchiyeleku, 1984; Habtamu, 1991; Gedu, 1995). Consequently, researchers have not only focused on quantitative evidence at the expense of qualitative data but also have tended to take commercial sex workers as objects rather than subjects of study.<sup>(4)</sup>

Because of these kinds of methodological biases, the “findings and conclusions” about “prostitution” often sound like they had been pre-conceived and predicted. They portray “prostitution” as an “evil” practice that has negative moral, social, economic, and health consequences for society as a whole. They all raise various levels of alert against it with recommendations varying from the virulently abolitionist to the moderate regulationist. However, the ritual listing of “consequences and recommendations” did not have much to contribute due to the failures to understand the problem of commercial sex comprehensively.

The main drawback of “prostitution” studies in Ethiopia is that most of them fail to clearly or consistently distinguish the institution from the women who find themselves in it in one way or another. In Ethiopia, public and scholarly views on commercial sex seem to have taken it for granted that “prostitution” implies distinct forms of identity, attitude and behavior. Moreover, the “prostitutes” as a group have always been portrayed as social misfits with attitudes and behaviors described as inimical to society. More recently, under the threat posed by the HIV/AIDS phenomenon, this characterization of sex workers as social misfits imbued with dangerous social personalities and personal traits reinforced the long held bias against sex workers. The fact of the matter is that public and policy makers are insufficiently informed about the connections between commercial sex and health problems. Therefore, intervention programs, even when genuinely meant to help both the women and society, cannot be expected to be as effective as they should be.

I believe that any effort to reduce, regulate or eliminate the practice of commercial sex has to take into consideration the social dimension of the institution. One way of doing so is to shift the focus of research even more towards the women themselves and to bring to the foreground their *emic* descriptions of the social life behind commercial sex. I have set myself to this task in this paper. Accordingly, I will describe the social ties between sex workers and a variety of other categories of people, from their family members to their relatives, from their roommates to their neighbors, and from their co-workers to their clients. By so doing, I will try to bring to light the simple, but often-forgotten fact that behind commercial sex are women who are mothers, sisters, daughters, relatives, neighbors and friends of the very people that we want to protect from the ills of “prostitution.”

## SOCIAL LIFE AMONG COMMERCIAL SEX WORKERS OF ADDIS ABABA

## I. Affirming Social Ties: The Dilemmas and Strategies of Sustained Contact

Listening to sex workers as they tell the story of why and how they started work and why they are still working, one cannot fail to notice a deeply moral element. That moral element is the commitment of the women to the well being of their kin, particularly to members of their immediate family. For many women, the basic reason both for entering commercial sex and for staying in it is to provide for loved ones who stand in critical need of material support. The material impoverishment of many households got so grave and poverty so deeply entrenched, many teenage girls found themselves compelled to do something about it, even if this meant taking up commercial sex work and thus confronting another moral dilemma.

Yeshi is a migrant to Addis Ababa. She has been in sex work for the last four years. She is highly committed to her family members living back in Raya (Wollo), her home village.

I come from Raya Almata. I came into this kind of life due to the poverty of my family. My parents had 10 children of whom 3 had died and 7 of us have survived. When I first came here I took up employment as a domestic worker for 20 *birr* a month. I was not able to stay in it for more than two months. Then I became a baby-sitter for a salary of 30 *birr* a month. Then I shifted to another household for a slightly better salary of 25 *birr*. All of this money I dutifully sent to my folks... For quite sometime I was not able to buy myself as much as a pair of slippers. I shifted from place to place in domestic work and reached a salary of 75 *birr* working as a cleaner in a restaurant. Still I was never able to improve my lot because I was sending money to my folks. Eventually it was a woman who worked with me in the restaurant who encouraged me to go to the *dalala* [broker] house to look for a better job...ended up in *Doro Manaqia* working as a commercial sex worker. I took up the work because I thought I might be able to support my folks relatively easily. I tell you, I came into this work for the sake of my folks. I am still in it for them. I have tried a number of times to get them out of poverty. Still my dream is to see them live better. I am prepared to accept a sacrifice even greater than HIV, a sacrifice that might even result in my immediate death as long as I can help bring better days for my folks.

Yeshi interprets what she is doing as acts of sacrifice (not of adventure), acts of sacrifice that are expected of a daughter. From her point of view, what she was doing to save her parents from starvation, humiliation or possible death is deeply moral; it is something that she would be proud of rather than ashamed

of. By the same token, the most painful condition to be in for a woman who does this kind of work is to fail to provide even minimal support for people to whom she owes it. I will pick up this theme again in the following section.

The morality behind the action of the woman in the above case (as well as in many others) comes out even more strongly when one considers the fact that there is no material benefit of any kind or any other kind of reward that comes to the women from what they do. In other words, this is not an act of transaction in which someone does something in the hope of getting something in return. In fact, it is an act in which a sacrifice of the most serious kind is consciously accepted for the redemption of others. Yeshe's remark that she is prepared to accept a sacrifice "even greater than HIV, a sacrifice that might even result in my immediate death as long as I can help bring better days for my folks" is both pertinent and powerful in this context.

It is one thing to sacrifice oneself for the sake of loved ones and to resolve the moral dilemmas thereof individually; it is quite another matter, however, to expect that those for whom the sacrifice is made would appreciate it and accept the social costs of the action. Several women to whom I have talked have faced this serious dilemma. The strategy that most of them have adopted to deal with the dilemma is to refrain from being honest about what they do to earn an income. Yeshe told her parents that she works for a pastry shop. Sometimes the secret of women in sex work gets unveiled leading to embarrassment. Yeshe shares what happened when her mother traveled to Addis Ababa to visit her.

I had to devise a strategy to have my mother spend the night somewhere else rather than in my house...What I did was tell my mother that I worked night shift at the pastry shop and that there is a roommate of mine who comes and sleeps on the single bed in the house at night. I begged a woman who is my neighbor to let my mother pass the nights in her house. The woman was generous, and allowed me to do so... Unfortunately, my mother discovers that this neighbor of mine is a Muslim and found it impossible to stay in the house. The woman also wore heavy perfume, to which my mother had some kind of allergic reaction. Imagine the embarrassment when my mother returns to my house late at night while I was sleeping with a client... Fortunately, some neighborhood kids alerted me about my mother's coming. I had barely enough time to chase the man out of the house and have a young girl next door come and lie down on my bed so that my mother would think of the girl as my roommate. Finally, we pretended as if my "roommate" was leaving the bed for my mother. For the remainder of the time that my mother was in town, I had to find another place and work.

Under these kinds of conditions it is difficult to believe that the people whose feelings the women are trying to protect through the acts of misrepresentation do not know or sense what is going on. It will not be wide

off the mark to assume that a “conspiracy of silence” surrounds the situation, a conspiracy in which the woman does not tell and the beneficiaries don’t ask. In short, a situation develops in which both parties understand each other without talking. This is what partly explains why a very significant number of women said that their folks knew what they did, but never acknowledged their actions openly.

The other strategy, equally common, is to tell the truth about engagement in sex work and justify it as an economic necessity. A strikingly significant number of women said that they practiced commercial sex with the open knowledge of their family and kin. In this scenario, the two parties might join together in keeping “the secret” from others. This may include making arrangements about housing and work place to avoid family embarrassment. However, there are conditions where such arrangements may not be possible, either for lack of housing or for lack of sufficient resources, leading to an open engagement in sex work out of residences shared with one’s family. Indeed, in many cases, the work might be done inside the residence itself, not just out of it. It is not uncommon for the woman to be both the household head as well as the only breadwinner. When this happens, sex work is combined with domestic responsibilities at home, including the nursing of the old or of the young.

The women who seek to maintain social ties and support with their relatives by engaging in commercial sex (which many consider as ‘acts of sacrifice’) explain their entry into commercial sex either in terms of economic difficulties encountered by the family as a whole or in terms of crises created by the death of one or both of the parents. In the great majority of cases, however, women explain these ‘acts of sacrifices’ in relation to saving social ties with their children. There is more than sufficient evidence that sex workers take care of their children and that many, in fact, take up sex work specifically for that purpose. Needless to say, sex workers could have children both before and after entry into the work. It is not possible to generalize whether commercial sex follows or precedes parentage.

Prior to the recent widespread use of condoms for health reasons, the greatest source of insecurity for sex workers, particularly for those with little or no knowledge of birth control, was pregnancy. As often happens, a child born in the course of sex work is unlikely to have its paternity known or acknowledged. In my sample of 23 women who had children after they became sex workers, 8 reported that they did not know the fathers of their children, while 14 said that they knew the fathers but that the latter would not recognize paternity. A child could be born during short periods of withdrawal from sex work either due to marriage or due to an extended period of intimacy with a particular client. One of the key factors for return to sex work after abandoning it for long or short periods of time is lack of support for child rearing expenses. However, a good many women are also mothers prior to their engagement in commercial sex. In any case, the raising of children would always entail economic burdens on the women no matter where their children stay. In fact, the sheer difficulty of raising children while practicing commercial sex makes chil-

dren the nodal point of reconnection between the women and a variety of other people.

On the whole, the study reveals that a good number of women practicing commercial sex try to maintain social relationship with their children, parents, siblings, relatives and friends. The proceeds from sex work go in varying proportions to 'finance' the maintenance or reinforcement of these social ties.

## II. Putting Social Ties on Hold: The Dilemmas and Strategies of Avoidance

Sex work is universally regarded as shameful and demeaning; this was affirmed by each of the women who participated in the in-depth interviews. None of them wanted to be sex workers for the love of the profession. Nor did they claim to enjoy the work. My informants indicated that they have been suffering from the stigma associated with the work. If this has been the case, it is not clear how some authors made statements about "prostitution" being culturally "tolerated" or 'prostitutes' being nymphomaniacs in Ethiopia (Laketch, 1978; Reminick, 2003). The most prevalent complaint of women engaged in sex work is not that society despises the work, rather the fact that society looks only at their involvement in sex work without taking into consideration the compelling reasons that drive them into it.

There are always people in the lives of sex workers whom the latter associate with this public bias against sex work and thus avoid dealing with. Such people may include close relatives, members of kinship groups, age-mates, childhood friends, and the like. Sex workers chose the strategy of avoidance with these people in part because there are no compelling reasons for sustaining direct/regular contact and, therefore, it is possible to keep the relationship at a distance. However, avoidance also occurs because a wide circle of relatives or old acquaintances is simply too large to convince or share secrets with. Ironically, however, the circle might sometimes include the family members of the women, at times even including the very people who depend partly or fully on the incomes of the women. When this happens, the frustration on the part of the women is high because avoiding these people is not altogether possible.

But there are women who do, indeed, avoid all of their folks, family as well as kin, friends as well as acquaintances, and thus withdraw totally from the social circle within which they had lived prior to taking up commercial sex. The explanations for these withdrawals are varied. For some it is because these are rustic or rural people who are not knowledgeable about urban conditions and therefore cannot be told what is going on. For others, these are parents or relatives who are hard and rigid and thus who cannot understand the reasoning of the women for being in this line of work.

An interesting dimension of avoidance as a social condition is its relationship with the economic status or material condition of the women. Many of the women say that avoiding their kin and relatives becomes their only option in part because they have little to show for their engagement in this difficult and degrading work. In other words, not only are they living in shame but also in

destitution. According to the informants, it would have been easier to negotiate a degree of acceptability with one's kin if sex work had been materially rewarding or if the women could achieve a degree of material prosperity that can be displayed or shared with others. Sometimes contacts are lost and communications broken not because of entry into sex work *per se*, but because the woman has become increasingly unable to make ends meet and therefore totally unable to respond to the consequences of maintaining the contact. The story of Almaz, the woman who says that she has "nobody to call a relative," illustrates an extreme case of isolation. When she first came from Jimma, says Almaz,

I was so determined to help my parents. I sent every *santim* [money] that I made to them. Then I got pregnant and became a mother myself. It is hard to raise a child in my situation. There is nobody to support me. I have no idea whether my parents are alive or dead. I am completely cut off. My daughter keeps asking me about them. She says how come only the two of us exist without any relatives. She gets worried about what would happen to her if I died. She keeps begging me to take her to Jimma to meet my folks. But I can't afford to do that. I can't even afford the transport money.

Unlike Almaz, for most women the isolation from one's folks is not believed to be final and permanent. Relationships are put on hold because of current inconvenience only. They are renewable when and if conditions permit. These conditions could take the form of material well-being from the sex work or from engagement in other gainful employment. Many women confidently express their chances of reconnecting with their folks as soon as they either leave sex work or got prosperous within it.

What is interesting is that even those women whose entry into sex work has been discovered by their family, kin and relatives and have thus been forced into isolation, expressed confidence that they could easily make up with them and rejoin their folks if it becomes necessary. Many of them said that they would simply ask for forgiveness and get back. Selamawit, who had left home because she was tired of her mother's nagging, has returned to her mother several times, only to leave home again and return to sex work. Her latest return was caused by her pregnancy.

Family or relatives who are avoided by sex workers are also kept in mind by the latter as a fall-back option of last resort, that is, as a social world they would rejoin if things get worse and life becomes impossible. It is this firm belief in the temporary nature of separation from one's family, relatives or friends that explains the strategies the women use to hide their identity. The most frequently used strategy is the changing of names. The key informants expressed that women in the sex work rarely tell their real names to people. Of 100 respondents, 34 admitted that they assume different identities at work and the most frequent way of changing identity is changing a name.



### III. Building Social Ties and Networks: The Dilemmas and Strategies of Socialization

To be in a social limbo in relation to certain categories of people does not mean that the sex worker in Addis Ababa is a lone figure with little or no engagement with society. In fact, sex work happens to be one of the most socially demanding of occupations. It is socially demanding not just because it involves physical “intimacy” with the men to whom sexual service is provided but also because it is a life of insecurity for which a system of social support of all kinds is necessary. The best option that sex workers have to get out of this work is to be socially connected. No woman who seeks to leave this kind of life behind can afford to narrow down her social networks and close the door of self-advancement.

For many of the informants, sex work is tough work that involves insecurities and risks of all kind; however, it is also a kind of work that brings the women into contact with a wide range of people on a daily basis. There are three categories of people that are particularly noteworthy for this daily contact with sex workers: the men who come to them as clients, other sex workers who work and/or live with them, and neighbors who live in proximity to them. The men to whom service is given bring to the women both risks and opportunities. Women who work together can be competitive or cooperative with each other. Sex workers can be accepted and embraced by their neighbors or rejected and ostracized.

Men who come as clients present sex workers with a combination of opportunities and risks. Informants noted that men who come to purchase sexual services could be generous, kind, civil and caring individuals. Those clients who represent different degrees of opportunity to sex workers range from those who pay generously to those who provide psychological council, from those who encourage them to seek alternative employment to those who actually set them up in another field of economic activity. Men could also be mean, brutish and very abusing. Every woman who participated in the interviews reported to have experienced abuses at the hands of men, who come in various forms: from mean-spirited exploiters who refuse to make payments after their sexual desires have been gratified to the sexual predators who subject the women to physical agony and psychological terror, from the Casanova types who turn into parasites by domesticating themselves with the women, to pilferers and thieves who come to rob them.

In anticipation of the men who might abuse or mistreat them, the women build friendship with people who they hope will protect them or come to their rescue. These may be hotel guards, police officers, fellow sex workers next door or youth in the neighborhood. The insecurities of having to deal with new faces and new characters on a daily basis thus generate among sex workers compulsive socialization to ensure security. Another type of social interaction generated by insecurities that are expected to come from “bad” men is interaction among the women themselves. This takes the form of exchange of infor-

mation about their sexual encounters with men, particularly with the abusive men.

Men who show positive dispositions towards sex workers are treated by the latter equally positively. This positive reaction to “good” men takes various forms and passes through several stages, depending on the length of time for which the relationship is sustained. A caring man who treats a woman gently and visits her fairly regularly would become a *denbegna* (customer). His chances of qualifying as such will be higher if he is not involved with other women known to the particular woman he visits, and if he pays generously. A relationship with a *denbegna* does not necessarily imply emotional attachment with him; nor is the relationship with a *denbegna* necessarily known to other people.

When a relationship between a woman and her *denbegna* matures, the man becomes her *wedaj* (intimate person). This stage involves both emotional attachment and ‘public’ knowledge of the relationship. It also becomes exclusive in relation to other women, so that it is regarded as an affront or personal attack to the woman if another woman sleeps with the man. It is not, however, necessarily exclusive of other men, so that the woman would continue to sleep with other men in his absence. In some cases, however, a *wedaj* relationship might involve an arrangement in which the woman substantially reduces sexual encounters with other men or temporarily withdraws from sex work for varying lengths of time. I was told that this is a fairly common phenomenon these days, particularly with women who have built long-term relationships with foreign nationals who visit Addis Ababa. The women will withdraw from active sex work during the presence of their customers and return to the active mode on their departure. What is distinctive about *wedaj* is that the man would not be overlooked in favor of other men who may offer more money or make attractive promises to the woman.

When a relationship between a sex worker and her *wedaj* matures further, the man may become a *fiqregna* (lover). At this stage, the emotional attachment between the woman and her client is so strong that the relationship is not any longer perceived in commercial terms. His access to the woman would be exclusive to the extent that his presence would always make the woman totally unavailable for other men. A relationship with a *fiqregna* might also involve a flow of resources from the woman to the man and vice-versa apparently without an accounting of flows. It might also involve an arrangement in which the *fiqregna* resides with the woman, and runs a household with her. In fact, the term *bal* (husband) is sometimes interchangeably used with *fiqregna*, indicating the regularity of the relationship and the degree of intimacy involved. While most relationships eventually breakup, some do graduate into successful *gabicha* (marriage) and represent an exit for the women from sex work.

Another category of people with whom each sex worker has to live by balancing two potentially contradictory elements of competition and cooperation is other sex workers. Sex work is a competitive business in which there are no guarantees that a woman who is lucky today will be lucky tomorrow as well.

Due to a continuously declining 'market' caused by the HIV phenomenon, the competition among the women tends to be rough and merciless. Of the 100 respondents, 87 stated that there is vicious competition among the women over clients. There are cases of women sleeping with customers of other women. The study also reveals the existence of solidarity or mutual support among the women. Ninety-five respondents indicated that the women in the commercial sex business respect the principle of protecting each other against danger, while 93 respondents reported that they help each other financially. It is paradoxical that both competition and cooperation are getting intense as incomes from the sex market decline and as the business gets more and more dangerous.

The broadest social circle in the context of which sex workers of Addis Ababa come into contact with wider society is their neighbors. From interaction with neighbors, sex workers seek to establish channels through which they could have access to social or material resources that cannot be provided to them by individuals (by their family, kin, fellow sex workers or clients). The social resources that the women stand in need of might include protection against violence, support at times of illness or burial when death occurs. The material resources that they might obtain by drawing on their neighbors might include money and/or household goods of various kinds. Just as networking with different kinds of individuals is prompted by the desire to overcome the limitations imposed by the work itself and by poverty, so also is networking with a community of neighbors prompted by the desire to ensure physical and social security.

Sex workers relate to their neighbors both individually in an *ad hoc* manner (informal) and institutionally through membership in social organizations (formal). The informal interactions with neighbors take the form of social activities like visiting the sick, attending funerals or calling upon a bereaved neighbor; they include attending weddings or calling upon a neighbor who has announced some happy occasion. The formal interactions take the form of membership in community organizations like *idir* (a funerary association) and *iqub* (credit/saving union). Both *idir* and *iqub* take various forms. *Idirs* range from the gender-specific dinner *idirs* that help assemble food items at the house of the bereaved member for several nights to neighborhood associations (called *Dinkwan idir*) that organize funerals and make financial contributions to the bereaved. Likewise, *iqub* types range from small pools in which a few friends contribute and collect money in turns to large pools in which the women join in with a variety of other people.

The form that the interaction between sex workers and their neighbors takes varies considerably depending on the proportion in which establishments related to sex-work are combined with residential homes. In those neighborhoods where sex work is widely practiced, the relationship between the sex worker and other people in the neighborhood tends to be smooth and integrative, while in those communities where sex workers are few and far between, the tendency is for them to be isolated or left out on a broad range of issues. The manner in which sex work is conducted may encourage or discourage positive relation-

ships between sex workers and their neighbors. For example, sex work conducted at home is bound to take place in neighborhoods made predominantly of current or former sex workers. This results in a relatively easy integration of the women into their immediate surroundings. On the other hand, sex work carried out from a venue other than one's residence tend to limit or complicate the involvement of the women with the community around their residence.

I think it is fair to conclude from the foregoing that sex work in Addis Ababa sustains, and is in turn sustained by, a variety of social relationships that the women cultivate as part of their daily encounters with people they meet both at work and where they live. These social relationships are cultivated for two reasons: to make up for the social ties and interactions that have been disrupted because of engagement in sex work and to try and find an exit door out of sex work. In other words, they are cultivated both to make life in commercial sex bearable and to find a way out of this life. Because women who have taken up commercial sex are, by definition, women who live in the most serious forms of economic adversity, it is a matter of daily struggle for them to determine just how much of their time, their energy or their money should be devoted to this kind of social existence and how much of it should go into sustaining them and their dependents materially. Many women who spend money and time on building social networks do so because it is not possible to determine beforehand which kind of social investment might provide an exit out of this line of work and which kind would bring additional burdens on them. In fact, it is safe to assume that these networks have helped many women to eventually get out of sex work. Evidence from my interviews with currently practicing women confirms that they have enabled many women to exit sex work temporarily. Forty-seven of the women in my sample stated that they had quit sex work at one point and had returned to it later. For most of these women the exits were made possible through people with whom they came into contact while working as sex workers. Even if the exits do not come that frequently, there is no doubt that the network of friends, lovers, and neighbors that the women build around them makes their life in sex work bearable.

## CONCLUSION

This paper presents vital evidence to show that for the sex workers of Addis Ababa, engaging in commercial sex does not constitute withdrawal from society. On the contrary, what it means is that the women make a shift of focus and a conscious strategy to continue to live socially. It has been argued that this shift of focus and strategy is necessary, in part, because sex work is never taken up at will or accepted as a permanent undertaking by the women who engage in it and, in part, because of the fact of poverty, which virtually all the women in commercial sex face. By presenting the words of the women themselves, the paper shows that life as a sex worker in Addis Ababa is lived everyday by balancing one kind of morality (like the morality of materially helping fam-

ily members and relatives under stress) against another kind of morality (sexual morality), and by balancing the reality of economic adversity with hope.

The struggle between morality and reality produces three distinct forms of relationship between the sex workers and people around them. In the first form, we see the women struggling to maintain their ties with family and kin. In the second, we see them trying to protect existing ties from disintegrating by avoiding contact with family and kin who are believed to have reasons of their own not to accept the women's involvement in commercial sex. In the third form we see the women building a network of new relationships both to reduce the pain and agony of life as sex workers and to find ways of getting out of it. These are not mutually exclusive options, necessarily. All women who make a living through commercial sex try to combine them as much as possible. Some combine the options successfully, while others are compelled by circumstances to focus on one or another.

#### NOTES

- (1) This paper is a section of an MA thesis in Social Anthropology, which is going to be published by Forum for Social Studies (FSS). The thesis has four major parts. The first section surveys the literature on commercial sex with a particular focus on the shifting images of the female sex worker in Western, African and Ethiopian societies across time. It presents the diverse approaches to sex work and sex workers across cultures and times but establishes the essential point that in all views 'prostitutes' are collectively represented either as "debased" or as "exploited" categories of women. The second part presents a scheme for the differentiation of the sex worker population of Addis Ababa and accounts for significant changes that have occurred in the demographic characteristics and mode of operation of sex workers in the city since the 1970s and 1980s. The third section utilizes the scheme outlined in the second part and actually identifies and describes the various categories in Addis Ababa. The last major part of the thesis tackles the issue of how sex workers relate to non-sex workers, be they family, kin, friends, clients, neighbors, men or women. It describes the efforts that the women make to stay "normal" and to remain decent human beings. I am indebted to the Addis Ababa University School of Graduate Studies, the Center for Research, Training and Information on Women in Development (CERTWID) of Addis Ababa University and the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies (ASAFAS) of Kyoto University, Japan for generously funding the fieldwork and write-up of my MA thesis that become the basis for this text. I would also like to thank Dr.Gebre Yntiso for encouraging me to publish this work. Last but by no means least I am very much grateful to all the women who have generously taken time to answer my seemingly endless questions about their lives.
- (2) The field research was carried out over a period of eight months (June 2003- January 2004) in Addis Ababa with a sample of slightly over 100 female sex workers. In this sample women who represent the various kinds of lives related to commercial work were included.
- (3) In this paper I would use the terms "sex work" and "sex workers," rather than "prostitution" and "prostitutes." I will use the latter combination of terms only in referring

to previous uses critically or when I cite or quote previous writers, always in inverted commas.

- (4) This work employs both qualitative and quantitative methodology. It combines detailed one-to-one interviewing with focus group discussions and personal observation to bring out the perspectives of the women themselves. The quantitative data is composed of responses to a structured questionnaire by 100 sex workers.

## REFERENCES

- Aklilu, M. 1998. *Factors associated with HIV Infection among Sex Workers of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*. M.A Thesis, Department of Community Health, Addis Ababa University.
- Alemayehu, B. 1996. *Is Prostitution the Last Resort?: Case Study of Prostitutes in Two Kebeles of Addis Ababa*. B.A Thesis, Addis Ababa University.
- Alemayehu, M. 1973. *Urbanization as a Major Factor that Contributes to the Spread of Prostitution in Addis Ababa*. B.A Thesis, Haile Selassie I University.
- Andargatchew, T. 1967. The problem of prostitution in Ethiopia. in *Alumni Association Bulletin*. Addis Ababa.
- 1988. *The Crime Problem and its Correction*. Department of Sociology and Social Administration, Addis Ababa University (Unpublished).
- Atakilt, G.Y. 1994. *The Attitude of Bar Maids towards AIDS/HIV Prevention: A Case Study of 30 Bar Maids in a Few Selected Bars around Piazza*. Senior Essay in Sociology, Addis Ababa University.
- Ayehunie, S.1987. *Prevalence of anti-HIV Antibodies in Prostitutes and their Clients in Addis Ababa*. M.A Thesis, Department of Biology, Addis Ababa University.
- Baardson, P. 1993. *Child Prostitution in Addis Ababa: Survey and Background*. Report Prepared for Radda Barnen.
- Banchiyeleku, G. 1984. *A Survey on Causes of Prostitution in Higher 1 Kebele 07 (Addis Ababa)*. B.A Thesis, Applied Sociology, Addis Ababa University.
- Bethlehem, T. 2002. *Narratives of Three Prostitutes in Addis Ababa*. CERTWID, Addis Ababa University.
- 2003. How should prostitution be dealt with? *CERTWID Informs*, 7(3): 9-11.
- 2004a. *Sex Workers in Day Light: The Social Context of Sex Work in Addis Ababa*. M.A Thesis, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University.
- 2004b. Youth and HIV/AIDS in Addis Ababa: Perspectives on the interface between commercial sex and HIV/AIDS. *CERTWID Informs*, 9(2): 11-14.
- Gedu, A. 1995. *A Case Study of Five Bar Maids on their Situation and Attitude toward Rehabilitation*. B.A Thesis, Addis Ababa University.
- Habtamu, W. 1991. *An Assessment of Prostitutes of Akakie Awraja Industrial Zone*. B.A Thesis in Sociology and Social Administration, Addis Ababa University.
- Hussein, M.1998. *HIV-1 Subtype C in Commercial Sex Workers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*. M.A Thesis, Department of Community Health, Addis Ababa University.
- Kebede, M. 1993. *The Prevalence of HIV Infection and its Impact on Prostitutes*. Senior Essay in Sociology, Addis Ababa University.
- Laketch, D. 1978. *The Socioeconomic Position of Women in Addis Ababa: The Case of Prostitution*. Ph.D Dissertation, Boston University.
- 1991. *The Commoditization of Female Sexuality: Prostitution and Socio-Economic Relations in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*. AMS Press, New York.

- Lemma, G. 1968. *The Problem of Prostitution in the Urban Areas of Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa University (Unpublished).
- Mayor, H. 1962. *Prostitution and Venereal Diseases in Addis Ababa*. Addis Ababa University (unpublished).
- . 1963. *The Problem of Venereal Diseases in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa University (unpublished) .
- Mehret M., L. Khodavich & B. Shanko. 1990. Sexual behavior and some social features of female sex workers in the city of Addis Ababa. *The Ethiopian Journal of Health Development*, 4(2): 171-176.
- Mulumebet, Z. 2000. *Female Prostitution in Addis Ababa: Problems and Future Directions*. A Summary Report Prepared for A Research Outcome Dissemination Workshop, Addis Ababa University.
- Reminick, R. 2003. *Prostitution in Ethiopia*. Paper presented on the 15<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies. Hamburg (Mimeographed).
- Seble, N. 1998. *Child Prostitution: The Study of 15 Child Prostitutes in Merkato[Addis Ababa]*. B.A Thesis, Sociology and Social Administration, Addis Ababa University.
- Tamene, G. 1993. *A Case Study of 20 Prostitutes in Keftegna 5, Kebeles 06 and 12 in Addis Ababa*. B.A Thesis, Sociology, Addis Ababa University.

Author's Name and Address: Bethlehem Tekola, *Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University*  
E-mail: B. Tekola@batu.ac.uk

