

Prostitution in Windhoek, Namibia: An exploration of poverty

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FOREWORD

In 2003, the Namibia Institute for Democracy (NID) launched the Public Dialogue Centre, which aims to stimulate public debate in a non-partisan manner through carrying out research; organising public lectures and panel debates; and publishing volumes, reference books and occasional papers on a wide range of issues of national interest.

The Mentorship Programme attempts to contribute to academic capacity-building among students at Namibia's tertiary institutions. In order also to contribute to the widening of Namibia's local research base, the Programme aims at encouraging students to conduct research on contemporary social and political issues and compile reports on their findings. The research paper is then considered for publication as an issue of the NID's occasional paper series *Analyses & Views*. In cooperation with the relevant academic departments at Namibia's tertiary institutions, lecturers have been requested to supervise and oversee research projects carried out by the students. The aims and objectives of the Programme are the improvement of communication between qualified scholars, promising academic talents, and the Namibian public, and the promotion of a new generation of Namibian academics. Promising academic talents will gain experience in conducting research, compiling and publishing results, and presenting their findings to the public.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Prostitution, as a social activity that entails the commercialisation of human sexual relationships, is illegal under Namibian law (Shanghala 2000:4). However, Women's Action for Development (WAD) estimates that in the city of Windhoek's Katutura suburb alone, there were as many as 1,240 prostitutes (Ahrens 2006:9). To date, reliable data on prostitution in the country as a whole are scarce. WAD's conservative reference to Katutura excludes not only the city's central business district and its middle-class and elite residential areas, but also the numerous informal settlements: Babylon, Goreangab, Greenwell Matongo, Hakahana, Havana, Kilimanjaro, and Okahandja Park D. In addition, WAD's estimate dates back several years. A current approximation would have to take into consideration the urban population growth rate estimated at 5% per annum (GRN 2004:49), resulting in a monthly influx of rural migrants into Namibia's commercial, administrative and political heart, reported at 600 per month in 1995 (CW 1996). Therefore, it would not be far-fetched to assume that the actual number of prostitutes in the entire city could be anywhere close to 5,000. Country-wide, considering the rapid urbanisation of such centres as the coastal towns of Lüderitz, Swakopmund and Walvis Bay, and the regional border towns/transit routes of Namibia's north, i.e. Katima Mulilo, Oshakati/Ondangwa, Oshikango, and Rundu, the number could easily double to close to 10,000 prostitutes – a figure of demographic significance. Although prostitution is illegal in Namibia, there is no specific law to prosecute it. Those suspected of prostituting can only be arrested on the

pretext of trespassing, loitering, and public nuisance. Prostitutes' customers are hardly ever arrested (LAC 2002:2).

Similarly, although the annual report for 2003 by the United States' Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (OMCTIP 2003:7) indicated that Namibia was one of 45 African countries affected by human trafficking as a transit country, with the main link areas being some of its immediate neighbours – Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zambia – there is no law on or against human trafficking in Namibia (LAC 2000:2). Moreover, there continues to be no locally conducted research specifically on the topic.

It was against this lack of adequate empirical studies of both prostitution and human trafficking that the current research project was conceived and undertaken. Although the original research idea proposed to gather data and systematically document the prevalence, extent, and impact of prostitution by adolescents and women, and its possible linkage to the internal and external trafficking of this group of people for exploitation purposes, this initial research project has limited its main focus on prostitution to begin with.

A second aim was to produce a well-collated report, with recommendations to disseminate as a reference/advocacy resource to all stakeholders within the women and children's rights sectors. The report may enable stakeholders within these sectors to lobby for informed decisions on legislation and policies.

While the scope of the research was limited to the city of Windhoek, for

² Human trafficking will be the focus of a research project by this author in the near future.



comparison's sake, the researcher also visited the Owambo capital of the north, Oshakati – with its urban shebeens – and Oshikango, the bustling town on the border with Angola.

A total of 100 questionnaires were administered to 84 respondents in Windhoek (72 females and 12 males), 7 respondents in Oshakati (6 females and 1 male), and 9 respondents in Oshikango (all females). An adult male prostitute was interviewed in Oshikango, but he declined to complete the questionnaire. In addition, and unexpectedly, 10 pimps volunteered to be interviewed and were. However, since finding pimps who would be ready to share their experiences had not been anticipated and were, therefore, not catered for, information on pimping was limited to the 88 female and 12 male prostitutes aged between 15 and 49 years that were interviewed. Interviews were conducted when respondents were working, i.e. both in the day and at night, in the informal settlements of Babylon, Havana, Kilimanjaro and Okahandja Park D as well as parts of Katutura, covering streets, homes and shebeens. The highways became an important focus, mainly the Northern Industrial Area section of the B1, where daytime prostitutes commonly known as rail jumpers conduct business, accompanied by their pimps. The research also covered the centre of town, its main streets, some night-clubs, hotels, and restaurants. In this zone, the core area enclosed the quarter formed by Rev. Michael Scott Street, Garten Street, Ausspannplatz, and Church Street. Occasionally, the circumstances pointed to the need to include some of the more affluent suburbs, to visit establishments in Eros and Windhoek North.

Because this was a fairly new area of study in Namibia, coupled with the stigma and sensitivity usually linked to prostitution and human trafficking in Africa generally, and allowing only limited (and seldom safe) access to the researcher, a multi-dimensional research method was applied. It entailed approaching a small number of members of the target group to form a focus group; requesting this group to assist in the research; and, thus, have them provide and facilitate access to the field. The focus group was trained in simple research methodologies. The researcher benefited from their expertise in the field and integrated them into the process of data-gathering. Moreover, this method provided the participants with an opportunity to look at the issues they were researching – their own issues – with more insight, and to rethink their life's paths and what alternatives posed themselves. Thus, methodologically, the project in hand combined three facets: participatory observation, transformative intervention, and classic, questionnaire-based data collection.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore the prevalence and extent of prostitution in the city of Windhoek, together with the circumstances in which prostitution prevails, and then to analyse the issues that emerge from the research findings. Finally, this paper presents some critical conclusions and recommendations, which could set the stage not only for public awareness about prostitution and its impact on society as a whole, but also to stimulate active national debate in the search for permanent and workable solutions to the issue of prostitution.



2. THE RESEARCH PROCESS: PROFILES OF THE FOCUS GROUP

In order to break the ice, the ten participants of the initial focus group were encouraged to outline and share their personal profiles and experiences. In order to give a first-hand impression of the field of the research, the following three profiles of members of the focus group are presented, based on direct interviews and information shared during focus group discussions:

- Mara is a 33-year-old woman, a mother of four children. She describes herself as a former high-class prostitute, who patronised hotels, streets, shebeens and rave parties in Katima Mulilo and Walvis Bay. Her prostitute mother dumped her close to a Catholic mission at the age of 2 months, from where she was collected and raised by her maternal grandmother. She did not get to know her mother until she was already an adult. She still does not know the identity of her father. Mara dropped out of school as a teenager in 1992 because she fell pregnant. When she initially entered prostitution, it was on a part-time basis, principally to support her baby and grandmother. Later, she worked as a maid at a bed and breakfast lodge in Mariental, where she met and married her husband, a tour guide for the lodge. They had two children together. The relationship proved unstable, so her husband chased her out of the house, taking all three children along with him and vowing never to see her again. Mara took to prostitution again, spending eight years at Windhoek's Snyman Circle, in Swakopmund and Walvis Bay's streets, and in Katima Mulilo. In

Windhoek, she says she prostituted in "hotels along Independence Avenue", and that when the police clamped down on the prostitutes, she moved to Walvis Bay. However, she found the capital less dangerous. According to Mara, prostitutes did not use hard drugs, although they were addicted to dagga, alcohol and smoking. In Walvis Bay she apparently joined her cousin, also a prostitute, who lived with a white man. Mara tells of how she 'worked' along the beach-front area and in the streets along the shoreline, where she found plenty of customers and earned a regular income of N\$1,000 a day. However, she also says she found the area highly dangerous because there were what she calls "high-profile hookers" who were wild, aggressive and dangerously competitive. She recalls the night her cousin died in a car accident with some sailors (customers) at around 03:00. Mara's account of her stay and experiences in Walvis Bay is dominated by a club where she says she and her "friends operated regularly". Here, she claims they "used a lot of cocaine" for which she had to pay N\$200 per gram. The sailors seemed "accustomed to the use of heavy drugs", and regularly brought new types with them from abroad. In those night clubs, she claims, "overseas drug suppliers meet local dealers, prostitutes and their customers". Mara reckons that "over 100 prostitutes were murdered" during her time in Walvis Bay "by unknown people and for unknown reasons" – a recurring theme among other respondents as well. She recalls how one night, while heavily drugged, she fell off a ship cabin and broke her ribs and remained in hospital for six months not knowing whether she would ever get out alive

³ Each one was given two hours for this exercise, after which the whole group discussed the issues that arose from the presentation. Only two participants would make their presentations each day: one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

⁴ To respect the respondents' anonymity, all names in this report have been changed.

⁵ "Gatjies" (black ganja, i.e. hashish) costs N\$25 per gram, while 'rock' (crystal meth) goes for N\$100 a gram and stays in one's body for five days before its effects wear off," she narrated. Apparently she participated in 'rave' parties – underground all-night parties where hard drugs were sampled, like at wine-tasting events, "where dealers auction their drugs".



as she “was very sick”. When she finally recovered, she decided to leave for Katima Mulilo to join her sister. On her way north, a trucker paid her N\$500 for sex in the truck. He then dumped her in Okahandja.

Survival in Katima proved harder than at the coast. Poverty and stiff competition forced prostitutes to offer sex “for just a cup of small fish”, she says. According to her, truck drivers paid prostitutes in kind.

Mara met many foreign prostitutes from Angola, Botswana, the DRC, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. They all “just managed to survive” as they shared their hard experiences, “sniffing drugs together”. In her view, they were “simply sisters sitting along Zambezi River, watching majestic crocodiles and hippos glide down the river”: women full of hope, waiting for the chance to ‘catch’ a customer. In her world of prostitution, she says she “learnt that you do not travel with a big bag of illusions” as she emphasises the dangers of Windhoek’s streets. She narrated a story of how she was picked up by a black customer one night; the man drove her in his car to his house on the outskirts of town, where he gave her food, alcohol, some drugs, and the N\$500 she demanded for sex. He instructed her to strip naked and lie down, after which he apparently called out to his ‘friend’ to join them. To Mara’s rude shock, she watched a huge brown and black snake crawl towards her and move over her body, making her shiver in fear to her customer’s obvious amusement and satisfaction. He paid her another N\$500. Back in the streets, she was shocked to find that many of her colleagues had already gone through the same experience with the snake. For a month she

drenched herself with alcohol, not being able to go with any man.

Mara’s story took a different turn when, in 2005, she met Father Hermann Klein-Hitpass, a Catholic Priest who supplied food and clothes to prostitutes. He persuaded her to slow down her street activities. Later, she decided to approach the offices of the Council of Churches of Namibia (CCN) for help. By that time, she was heavily pregnant and HIV-positive. Mara concludes, “This is my prostitution journey: I sold sex to between 800 and 1,000 customers – sometimes with condoms, sometimes without. And yet I have no money, no accommodation, no food, no clothes, no chance of even seeing my own children. It’s a hopeless world. I want to deliver this child in my womb and take care of her. I hope she is born HIV-free. That’s all I want now, that is if I can get some sheets of corrugated iron for a roof and build a shack of my own and just live.” In 2006, Mara became involved in a CCN home-based-care project for people living with HIV/AIDS, for which she gets paid N\$150 a month.

- Saima is a 31-year old mother of three children. She grew up with her grandmother. She attended several schools and completed Grade 10, but had to drop out owing to a lack of finances. In 1999, she gave birth to her first child. She slid into prostitution and criminality in 2000 when she found no proper means of survival. Reviewing her recent life, Saima emphasises the thin line between prostitution and criminality. She recalls an incident one night when she and a friend were operating at a hotel along Independence Avenue. She administered a substance she calls “blue eye drops” (which when swallowed, apparently



makes one immediately fall into a deep sleep) to a South African customer, after which she robbed him of R6,000 (equal to N\$6,000). With that money she bought the fridge and TV she now owns. Apparently, this was a common way to get easy money. They would put two or three “blue eye drops” into a customer’s drink and when the customer passed out, they would rob him. They regularly got away with it because the hotel guards were their accomplices: they shared the loot with them. However, the police finally tracked Saima down. She was taken to prison, but bailed herself out. Together with other prostitutes she approached the then First Lady, Kovambo Nujoma, and the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) in Windhoek for help. Their initiative stimulated the first research ever on prostitution in Namibia, which culminated in the publication of the LAC report *Whose body is it?* in 2002. Yet, Saima’s career had not yet come to an end. On yet another night, while fighting with a customer who wanted to leave without paying her, she grabbed his genitals and squeezed them so hard that he violently bit her face and aggressively pushed her out of the car into the road. That was the day she decided to give up her life on the streets and started selling vegetables. Saima states that prostitution is “very unpleasant, as some sex customers often force the girls to have sex with dogs”. But she also says prostitution “had its lighter moments too”. She remembers the time she spent over a month in another hotel, also along Independence Avenue, with a white Canadian man who was on a short-term contract with an international organisation in the city. The hotel staff knew her as the man’s regular girlfriend. During the day she walked the streets looking for other

customers. In the end, she and her friends mercilessly robbed the Canadian of his money and belongings. “That is life on the street”, as Saima sums it up. “It was not fun; it hurt us inside, but we did it for the money, so that we could feed our children and pay the municipality. We also wanted to have clothes and wash ourselves; for all these things we did it. I was a prostitute for two-and-a-half years, and for those 30 months, I was in hell. It was a roller coaster, up and down and up and down.”

- Bethino is a male prostitute aged 33, who serves homosexuals of all colours and shades. He was born and raised in Windhoek by his single mother, who died in 2003. He never knew his father. He grew up with five siblings – four sisters and a brother. His identity within the family, however, defined him as the fifth female. From when he was small, his mother used to address him as a girl since he was the only boy to follow all his sisters, and she believed he “was actually meant to be a girl too and looked like one”. She even dressed him in girls’ clothes, and whenever he accompanied her to church or to funerals, they would both wear traditional women’s dresses. Bethino claims he knows himself only as a girl, and that at the age of 10, while in Grade 3, a friend of his introduced him to prostitution. According to him, his family always lacked money and food, so he felt compelled to contribute to the household income. He has now been a prostitute for over two decades. He asks, “Can you imagine being used as a sex toy at the tender age of ten?” Apparently, he had a regular Canadian customer for a number of years and a Namibian one for six years. He operated in a group of 20 young men servicing male customers,



both black and white. Only five of the original group are still alive today: the rest have either been murdered or have succumbed to various diseases. Not surprisingly, he too says his prostitution experience was highly dangerous and painful. Like Mara, he also mentions having been forced into sex with dogs and snakes. He recalls an incident in which a customer pointed a pistol at his face and started beating him with a bat, leaving his face badly bruised. Bethino had to jump over a fence and run for his life. He bears the scars to this day. "It's terrifying and very dangerous, not a life for anyone – but we do it for the money; you need the money. For a blow job (oral sex) you can get maybe N\$200, and for ordinary sex you can get about N\$300 or N\$350. It is not a good life at all; we do it because we have no alternative – so that we can survive," he summarises. In 2002, his very close male prostitute friend was murdered in the streets, following which the police arrested Bethino and kept him behind bars as a suspect. When he was released, he seriously considered quitting prostitution. His mother's death in 2003 acted as a further catalyst for him to "go the Lord's way and start a new life". He now goes around preaching in his community, and although he is under pressure in his church to change his sexual orientation, he emphasises that he is not ready to change his "position on gayism". He believes he was "created that way and under no circumstances will he change". He does not see why he should change. Similarly, although he is scared of AIDS, he does not want to go for an HIV test. He says that his major problem is that while the house he inherited from his mother is a "wonderful blessing" because it provides him with a roof for which he is "grate-

ful", it simultaneously presents him with a serious obstacle to an irreversible decision – as it is now on the brink of being repossessed by the municipality due to unpaid rates and utility bills.

3. ON THE STREETS

These three portraits represent the life stories and circumstances of the ten members of the focus group, which were to assist in carrying out the research while working as prostitutes. In the following step, after mapping out a week's work based on their knowledge of the city's commercial sex activities, the group took the researcher to the streets.

3.1 Monday, 3 July 2006

The group decided to observe the Western Bypass highway in Windhoek's Northern Industrial Area. The focus group members advised that because it was the first week after the end of the month, this section of the highway would characteristically be busy with customers: employees of some parastatals, private enterprises and Government departments and institutions would have been paid only a few days before, and some of them were the streets' regular customers. With money in their pockets, some men are known to visit the highway on some mornings as well as lunchtimes to buy sex. The research group found three girls belonging to one ethnic group, and one young girl belonging to another ethnic group parading along the eastern side of the highway, while a group of three women of yet another ethnic group operated on the western side of the highway. Sex takes place in the nearby bush, in the dry river bed below the highway, in

⁶ Unlike the highway prostitutes, when the city-centre-based day and night street prostitutes are picked up by their customers, their pimps wait for them until they return. They (the pimps) do not follow where the cars drive to. However, when the women return, they also hand over their money to their pimps.



cars, and in the drain tunnel under the road. It was surprising to see different types of men arrive, from different ethnic and racial groups; some walked, others drove cars. Sex along this highway is a very quick matter. It takes no more than five to six minutes altogether, while earnings range between N\$5 and N\$70. The first customer to arrive is usually given the first choice amongst the prostitutes, accompanied by their pimps. They surround the customer's car for him to take his pick, after which the group moves on to the next customer to make his choice too. As soon as a prostitute gets a customer, the pimp, who is usually a male, gives her a condom and follows her at a distance, apparently for security's sake. When she returns she hands him her earnings, and they move on to the next customer that becomes available. Some prostitutes talked about how, when they had a seemingly 'rich' customer, they tried to get as much money out of him as possible, failing which their pimps attacked and robbed him. As if to denote a normal working environment, the highway prostitutes and their pimps take a packed lunch with them "to eat while they wait for customers". They have dug up a water pipe below the road bridge, and broken it to supply themselves with water.

According to the respondents, and supplemented by the researcher's observations, customers included professional male employees of public departments and institutions. One of them drove off with a 17-year-old girl in his Porsche into the bushes; there were farmers from a particular racial group, security guards dressed in uniform, and several taxi drivers. The group's presence did not hamper highway activities at all: the prostitutes and their cus-

tomers went about their business as if nobody was watching. Some of the customers included elderly well-to-do men who came to satisfy themselves with adolescents their children's age. The girls said most of "the men were their regular customers".

Thus, it seems as if street prostitution in broad daylight is accepted, as it is done in the open without visible restrictions. A law enforcement agency vehicle passed by, completely oblivious of what was going on in the area. On the other hand, with the 'highway prostitutes' at 'work' every day of the month, it seems that, inevitably, they have managed to suspend one of the age-old customary practices. In addition, these young girls and women do not seem to have enough power to negotiate or determine issues that relate to their health. The groups along the highway informed the researcher that although they "try as much as possible to get customers to use condoms" for their own protection "against unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV infection", many "customers reject condoms and insist on naked sex". The heaps of used condoms found under the northern highway bridge and in the various river beds within the vicinity served to clearly contradict the young pregnant prostitutes, those who talked about suffering from STDs, and those who said they knew they were HIV-positive.

3.2 Tuesday, 4 July 2006

In the morning, the group first went to observe the activities around the famous 'Big Tree' in Rev. Michael Scott Street. Later, they moved to the vicinity of a private school where some male customers meet street prostitutes immediately after dropping their child-



ren at school for what has become popularly known as 'breakfast sex'. The rest of the morning was spent observing transactions around Monument Park next to the Ausspannplatz Circle, and near the area formed by the iway Customer Centre, the Ausspannplatz branch of Nam-Post, Pupkewitz Caterers, Sirkel Motors and the various gambling houses. There, six women aged between 16 and 46 years, who said they "come from Rehoboth, Mariental and Keetmanshoop", waited for customers all day long, mainly seemingly high-profile men of all ethnic and racial groups approaching the women in "crawling cars". A 21-year-old woman claimed that she regularly served "a happily married Okahandja businessman" who had sex with her three times a week. Another sex worker, a 25-year-old coloured girl, was with her pimp. He had beaten her severely, leaving her with large septic wounds on her left cheek, her right leg, and her right arm. He himself had a large wound on his right hand he claimed to have sustained while they had fought, using bottles. The fact that they looked as though they had not bathed in days did not seem to hamper their street business. In full view of the researchers, they jumped into and out of nice-looking cars.

The researchers spent time to talk to a 46-year-old coloured woman. She said she was a mother of three children, and claimed a customer had shot off her missing left-hand index finger. She explained how she travelled from Rehoboth every day with her four-year-old son and her pimp – who was also her lover. She was "usually picked up for N\$20", which allowed the couple to buy food and alcohol

from a nearby shop. They drank alcohol "the whole day", and returned to Rehoboth in the evening with any left-over cash they had. If they did not have enough money for transport, they all slept under the bridge along the Hochland Park road, behind the Game Centre. The woman, who seemed perpetually drunk, believed she was "very much in love" with her pimp, and although he was living off her, she could not control herself because she felt she "needs him".

A 26-year-old prostitute traumatically narrated her experiences with dogs, snakes, and abusive customers. She claimed she had sustained the wound in her left leg, which was oozing with a mixture of blood and puss, during a fight with a customer a few days earlier. She also had several scars: a large one near her armpit, and smaller ones on her face, neck, and hands. She reported that one of her regular customers had trafficked her to Iceland where she had been sold to a group of lesbians. He had made all the travel arrangements for her, including a passport, ticket and visa. When her three-month tourist visa expired, the man apparently brought her back to Namibia "for a new permit", but when she arrived in Namibia she managed to run away.

3.3 Wednesday, 5 July 2006

As Wednesday is sometimes known as 'Ladies' Night' in Namibia, the group decided to take a night stroll along Tal Street and Church Road, around the Wernhil Centre, down Kurt von François Street, past J&J near Government Office Park, and down Garten Street, to observe what was going on. This night observation also

⁷ The team saw a freshly used condom containing sperm that was simultaneously covered in fresh blood. This indicates that one of the women had had sex while in her menstruation period. Doing so goes against many customary beliefs and practices in Africa, which prohibit sex during menstruation.

⁸ Although the team counted over 100 used condoms in the drainage area and in the dry river bed the concerns of the 'highway prostitutes' corresponded with the findings of this research in respect of 'naked' sex.



included the nightclubs near the Maerua Mall area, and two hotels along Independence Avenue and the adjacent clubs and restaurants. The team met two teenage girls operating along Independence Avenue. At the corner of Tal Street and Church Road were 8 young women aged between 16 to 34 years, with an educational background ranging from Grade 4 to 12. The cluster included a young man who had apparently been operating as a prostitute since his childhood. He pretended he was just a friend of the young women, providing them with physical protection. He claimed he had earned a degree in Business Administration at the University of Namibia. This group appeared much neater than the prostitutes on the Western Bypass and at Ausspannplatz. One of the young women claimed she had been stabbed by a police officer and was still nursing a neck wound. She maintained that although she had in fact attempted to file a charge, police at the station she had reported to had refused to register her complaint. While the research team was talking to this cluster of prostitutes at the corner of Tal Street and Church Road, a police car with four officers came to arrest them for drinking in the street. One officer went straight to the hedge of a nearby residence where the prostitutes hid their alcohol when they saw the City Police coming, or when they had to rush to a customer. However, when the police team noticed the research team's presence, they refrained from taking any action but "promised" they would return the following day. This cluster operates during the day to collect money to enable them to visit bars and gambling houses in the evenings to get more customers.

3.4 Thursday, 6 July 2006

The group visited the informal settlements of Babylon, Havana, Kilimanjaro and Okahandja Park D. Here they targeted a different type of prostitution, namely those that worked 24 hours a day at shebeens in Windhoek's north-western shack settlements. The drinking of home brew (tombo) was literally perpetual among prostitutes, pimps, customers and shebeen owners alike. In most cases, the shebeens are just the front of the corrugated iron dwelling, most of them close to the road. Toilet facilities, if there are any, are very close by, emitting a strong stench. Here, the link between poverty and prostitution is clearly evident: customers pay only N\$1 for sexual favours. The majority of the prostitutes seem to have no permanent accommodation. They live in groups and pay rent on a daily basis. Their external outlook and personal hygiene are in a critical state. Many of the prostitutes are teenage girls.

3.5 Monday, 17 July 2006 and Tuesday, 18 July 2006

The researcher took advantage of a trip to northern Namibia to visit Oshakati and the Oshikango border post with Angola, and administered a limited number of questionnaires to prostitutes at shebeens, bars and lodges, and in rented rooms.

4. PROSTITUTION: A NAMIBIAN REALITY

4.1 Perceptions and reality

In normative terms, Namibian society – throughout the variety of its traditional and Christian cultures – regards prostitution as socially and legally un-



acceptable and undesirable. Accordingly, public perception sometimes even tends to deny its existence (Horner 2006:2). However, scientific examination allows only one inference: prostitution is deeply institutionalised in Namibian society. The current research found prostitution in Windhoek a clearly visible, 24-hour activity. This was in sharp contrast to Oshakati, where prostitution commences in the late afternoon around 18:00, and Oshikango, where “it moves from the houses into the streets” from around 16:00. Contrasting present-day prostitution with its counterpart in yesteryear, a 49-year-old prostitute and mother of seven who had been in the trade since the age of 18, i.e. since 1965, said the following: “It’s not like in the old days. The ‘Boers’ (former South African white colonial regime) did not allow anybody to walk in the streets at night, so prostitution was secret. Now it’s there openly at every street corner. There is no control anymore. That is why children get into prostitution”. The prostitutes were neither ashamed nor embarrassed. This demonstrates the commodification of sexual relationships. Prostitution is related to poverty, and reflects the unsatisfactory and abject living conditions of the majority of those affected by it. Prostitution oversteps class, race, and ethnic boundaries, and follows distinct gender patterns, where the male is mainly the prostitution customer, while the female is by far the prostitution vendor.

4.2 Prostitution hot spots

These include but are not limited to bars/shebeens, streets in the central business district, the Western Bypass, nightclubs, gambling houses and, generally, the capital’s informal settlements. In fact, 82% of the respondents

were found operating in the informal settlements and the streets visited, compared with only 2% who operated either in hotels or homes. Some 6% comprised foreign women who live exclusively in lodges, and patronise high-class nightclubs and restaurants where they target tourists. The (statistical) rest crowd the city’s streets. Prostitution hot spots and prostitution are bonded by their common denominator – alcohol and hard drugs. In all the informal settlements the research team visited, besides firewood, alcohol was the leading and most prominent trading and income-generating commodity, with every second shack exhibiting a visibly busy shebeen.

4.3 Who is in prostitution?

A night walk down the hot spots in Windhoek, Oshakati and Oshikango indicates that prostitution in Namibia knows no boundaries of any kind, be it sex, colour, age or affluence. Nonetheless, statistically it shows a clear sex and age structure: the typical prostitute is a young female. Of the 100 questionnaires administered to prostitutes in Windhoek (84), Oshakati (7) and Oshikango (9), 88% were females, compared with 12% males. Some 94% of the respondents worked full-time as prostitutes, while 5% operated part-time. The majority (92%) were single. The level of education, although varying, points to a rather educated majority of prostitutes. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of the respondents had attained at least Grade 9, but only 1% had not been to school at all. While 63% of the school drop-outs indicated a lack of financial support as the main reason for their lifestyle, 12% referred to having fallen pregnant as teenagers and having to leave school as a result.

⁹ The comparison with Oshakati and Oshikango – although provisional, as it has to remain within the limited context of this project – confirms this finding.



Prostitution reflects Namibia's present-day productive age range (15 to 49) and average life expectancy (49) for males and females: according to the 2001 population census (GRN 2004:54), life expectancy at birth in Namibia was 50 and 48 years for females and males, respectively. Unfortunately, the 15–49 age range corresponds with the impact of HIV/AIDS. According to the National Strategic Plan for 2004–2009 (Third Medium-term Plan, or MTP III; GRN 2004:4), AIDS accounted for 46% of deaths in the 15–49 year age group in 1999. Prostitution was youthful, with as many as 73% of the respondents being between 19 and 30 years of age, and 21% being teenagers between 15 and 19. Around 52% were between 19 and 30 years old – a critical age group for the country, as they form part of the 28% that constitute Namibia's population between 15 and 30 years (GRN 2004:52). Some 27% of the respondents were middle-aged women, i.e. between 31 and 49, while the males were mainly in their teens, except a few who were in their thirties.

Child prostitution recently seems to have become a common feature of local prostitution. Nationalities comprise mainly Namibian (89%), originating from as many as 12 different ethnic communities, while 11% are foreigners. The presence of foreign prostitutes, all hailing from sub-Saharan Africa, seems to be yet another new development. They are generally feared and detested by their Namibian competitors.

4.4 Who are the customers?

According to the members of the research team, the customers "come from all walks of life and all sectors of society, and are of all age groups, colours and races". Observation at the Western Bypass pointed specifically to salaried employees in private business and the Public Service, as well as to the self-employed workforce. On the other hand, guards and casual workers form the majority of customers in the informal settlements. Nonetheless, the demographic identity of the clientele is difficult to establish as customers are not easily approached by any research team. Homosexuals, both gay and lesbian, are common prostitution customers. Prostitutes that operate in the city centre at night repeatedly mentioned lesbians as their customers. Shanghala (2000:3) refers to young men who serve gays as rent boys. More than half (55%) of the prostitutes had between three and four customers a day; the rest had fewer than that.

4.5 Prostitution as a business:

Who are the beneficiaries?

The research findings point to a variety of symbiotic partners involved in, and benefiting from, the exploitation of the prostitutes' activities: boyfriends, washmen, pimps, drug lords, landlords, hoteliers, and shebeen owners. It has to be emphasised that the exploitative relationship between prostitute and beneficiary, as a rule, appears highly gendered. Most respondents stress that they do not regard sexual intercourse in prostitution as sex per se, but as a

¹⁰ In this section, where percentages do not add up to 100%, the difference reflects negligible divergences.

¹¹ Child prostitution seems to be a fairly new phenomenon. The researcher found an 11-year-old girl being initiated into prostitution by a group of adult prostitutes along the Western Bypass.

¹² One 33-year-old local prostitute voiced her anger at their presence: "They have invaded our territory; we are so angry. They take the bread out of our hands because they are more sophisticated; they change clothes, they patronise the expensive hotels. When the police chase them from there, they come to our streets. We chase and beat them. They must go away – it's our place, our space, for us. We are survival prostitutes; we have to strategise with different techniques all the time: hotel prostitution is not always profitable because it depends on how and when you hit a jackpot, but the streets always have customers. A tourist died in one of the city's main hotels last year. He had been with a Zambian prostitute. The hotel is now more careful, but the guards know us, the locals. They know that we're not dangerous; they protect us too. We also steal from foreigners – like we did from that UN expert. Money is life: it's my bread for tomorrow. We are Namibians. Them, they are foreigners!"



mere commodity. In their perception, they only do it for the money. When they want to have sex for pleasure, it will be with their regular boyfriends. Like pimps, boyfriends generally tend to be part of the same illegal underworld. Again, just like pimps, boyfriends usually share in the proceeds of prostitution, and in many cases depend on it as a primary or secondary source of income for their own and their family's livelihood. Pimps usually double as 'real sex' partners too.

Besides pimps and boyfriends, washmen represent another safety net to the prostitutes. Unfortunately, their relationship with the prostitute is highly exploitative in nature. Prostitutes have to spend a considerable amount of their income to bribe washmen in order to ensure a favourable working environment. This is just one of the ways in which prostitutes give up some autonomy and control over their business. In Oshakati and Oshikango it was also observed that bars and restaurants had rows of back rooms where customers could take prostitutes for sex at any time.

A total of 63% of the respondents used pimps. They act not only as their sales agents, but also exert considerable, if not total, control. Pimps are in charge of handing them condoms, they receive the money from the customer, and they decide how it is distributed. Pimping is predominantly masculine, with 55% being male. In the Windhoek setting of the research, most of the pimps had grown up on the streets, i.e. as what is commonly referred to as street kids. They said pimping was their "only source of livelihood".

As regards drug lords and shebeen proprietors as well as owners of bars, nightclubs and gambling houses, all were part of the prostitution outfit. Prostitutes confirmed a high prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse: 99% reported use of drugs, 98% conceded regular use of alcohol, 86% of cigarettes, and 62% of marijuana, while 17% were addicts of cocaine, crack, mandrax and various other kinds of pills. This gruesome picture of multiple addictions also points to the fact that the prostitutes dedicate a notable portion of their income from prostitution to the purchase of addictive drugs. The owners of entertainment establishments ensure adequate supplies of both alcohol and drugs.

Lodge owners and hoteliers, especially those servicing transit points such as highways and border posts, are also symbiotic beneficiaries as their premises become prostitution hot spots. Room rentals and alcohol, cigarettes, food and drug sales assure them of a share of the daily prostitution income. The same applies to the prostitutes' landlords. Due to the nature of their business, which depends on regular and unpredictable mobility, prostitutes – particularly foreign prostitutes who usually live in clusters under the leadership of the most dominant or oldest person in the group, either on temporary or no immigration status – do not enjoy contractual rental arrangements for their living quarters. Consequently, each prostitute is charged for accommodation on a daily basis. If anyone returns with a customer or a new friend, that person has to be paid for per night as well. The amount charged can vary daily, depending on the landlord's mood and needs, and the

¹³ Direct interview with a trainee in home-based care at the CCN on 12 May 2006.

¹⁴ Workers and security guards at hotels or nightclubs who collaborate with the prostitutes for monetary gain

¹⁵ In Okahandja Park D, at 10:00 on a Sunday morning, more than 20 teenage girls and boys found at a shebeen were evidently drugged. They said the money they had earned the night before had all gone into drugs and alcohol. A 24-year-old leader of a group of more than 15 foreign prostitutes stated she had spent N\$1,000 on drugs just for the previous evening.



prostitute's state of mind and physical condition. Rentals can be anything from N\$5 to N\$75 per person per day, depending on the type of accommodation.

5. MOTIVES: WHAT INDUCES AN INDIVIDUAL TO ENTER PROSTITUTION?

The majority (86%) of the respondents indicated that they had been forced into commercial sex by serious financial difficulties. Some 6% mentioned giving in to peer pressure, while the remaining 80% pointed to family complications arising out of such events as the death of one or both parents, parental divorce, or parental remarriage, all of which left the children exposed to a vicious cycle of difficulties and instability.

5.1 Lack of life-sustaining opportunities

Sociological studies of prostitutes show that prostitution is usually motivated by economic hardship. Such studies also establish a link between increased prostitution and a lack of job opportunities for women (Scott & Marshal 1994:529). The current general unemployment rate of 36.7% in Namibia, which is highest among women, makes young children and women highly vulnerable to prostitution. The picture is similar in other southern African countries. Some 64% of 1,000 respondents in a research project completed in 2002 by the Movement of Community Action for the Prevention and Protection of Young People against Poverty Destitution, Diseases and Exploitation (MAPODE) in Zambia attributed their entry into prostitution to poverty. A

total of 71% of all respondents in that study had actually entered prostitution at the lowest point of Zambia's economic collapse – between 1998 and 2002 (Kiremire 2002:53).

5.2 Family breakdown

The majority (68%) of the respondent prostitutes had either grown up with no parents at all or with only one parent, against 32% who grew up with both parents. Although 46% reported having grown up with their fathers, almost 50% had not. A total of eight respondents had never known their fathers, while four respondents had never known their mothers. In a few cases, maltreatment by stepparents or a parent's lover was put forward as a reason for their chosen lifestyle as prostitutes. Prostitution is also characterised by orphanhood: 31% of the respondents had lost both parents, while 37% had lost one parent. Of the parents who were alive, 46 were male and 52 female; of those that had died, 46 were male and 44 female. This perhaps relates to statistical information indicating that, by 2003, as many as 21,000 children in Namibia had already lost one or both parents to AIDS-related deaths (Maletsky 2004:1).

5.3 Teenage pregnancy and single motherhood

These two phenomena seem to be a significant push factor into prostitution. The majority (73%) of the prostitutes are themselves teenagers or in their early twenties, with 81% of the female prostitutes already having been pregnant at least once.

¹⁶ Another trend observed showed groups of prostitutes living in houses or rooms still under construction. Such houses had no lights and no water. The owners, who would find it extremely hard to rent out such houses otherwise, rented them to the prostitutes on a daily basis, and used the daily income to continue constructing until they had finished the house. The prostitutes said that once construction was complete and water and electricity had been connected, they were chased out and the houses were rented to ordinary people under ordinary contracts. Most prostitutes found at the Oshikango border post lived in such provisional accommodation.

¹⁷ The Namibian, 21 June 2006; "Higher statistics on unemployment no surprise to analysts".

¹⁸ The majority of the 148 prostitutes interviewed in Windhoek, Grootfontein, Keetmanshoop, Swakopmund and Walvis Bay by the LAC in 2001 gave their reason for taking up prostitution as being a lack of financial support.



5.4 Dropping out of school

This is another factor contributing to prostitution. Many of the women in the shebeens and streets had left school after Grade 7 or 10. A report by the Namibian Press Agency (NAMPA 2004, cited in *The Namibian*, 21 July 2004) attributes such a high school drop-out rate to the parents/ guardians' inability to meet education costs such as examination fees. On the other hand, even the many who had actually managed to earn their school-leaving certificate after completing Grade 12 did not seem to have been able to bank on that achievement. According to the Namibia Labour Force Survey (2004, cited by Van Zyl 2006:11), of the 223,000 persons who were unemployed, 108,00 were desperately searching for work, and the majority of these were females who struggled more to find work than males did.

6. CONSEQUENCES: WHAT GOES WITH PROSTITUTION?

Violence is purported to have increased dramatically in recent years. Some 94% of the respondents experienced violence in their prostitution, a figure certainly confirmed by their appearances. Many battered and mutilated women were found on the streets, both at night and during the day. Physical bodily violence is a constitutive part of the gendered social relationships in prostitution.

6.1 Violence

The types of violence experienced ranged from assault (91%), beatings (90%), insults (86%), harassment (74%), rape (67%), theft (52%), to food de-

privation (27%) and deportation (5%). Perpetrators of violence were customers (90%, including 7% lesbian customers), friends (52%), pimps and boy-friends (33%), law enforcement agents (25%), family members (5%), and drug dealers (3%). Respondents contended that "prostitution in Windhoek has now become highly dangerous and painful". They stated that while formerly prostitution-based street violence was limited to prostitutes themselves due to rivalry and protection of their personal operational stations (prostitution territories), recent years have witnessed both pimps and street boys (young homeless boys who live on the streets) regularly beating street prostitutes and robbing them of their income.

6.2 Objects used to perpetrate violence

Such objects included hands (95%), knives (81%), guns (64%), belts or whips (36%), bottles (33%), feet (29%), sticks or hockey sticks (24%), stones (19%), dogs/snakes/scorpions (19%), tear gas (7%), metal bars/pangas/hammers (7%), rough sex, forced use of vibrators and forced tattoos on bodies (5%), rotten eggs (4%), drugs (3%), hot water (1%). In addition, verbal abuse was mentioned by 22% of the respondents. Prostitution in Namibia is discriminatory and segregative, just like most other post-colonial African countries, because only its vendors bear the label of immorality on their backs, while its 'customers' do not necessarily suffer the same degradation. Moreover, prostitution in these countries has also become characterised by gross perversion. Some 19% of respondents in the Namibian study reported having been subjected to bestiality.

¹⁹ On 27 September 2006, *The Namibian* stated that a women's organisation which ran a shelter for abused women had recorded a total of 52 domestic violence cases reported to them, together with 16 reported cases of women who had been murdered during August and September 2006 alone.



6.3 Criminality and robberies

From the many and gruesome stories that women in prostitution in Windhoek, Oshakati and Oshikango tell, most unfortunately it seems as if prostitution in Namibia has become decidedly crime-ridden. This threatens not only the prostitutes themselves, but also their clients. While the researcher interviewed a group of prostitutes at the Oshikango border post, two armed police officers in plain clothes arrived to interrogate them about two murder cases involving some prostitutes' customers a couple of days earlier.

6.4 Premature deaths

Some prostitutes found operating in gambling houses around Ausspannplatz attribute the perceived dramatic increase in prostitution-based crimes to new prostitutes from other countries. They saw them as "more dangerous than local prostitutes" and accused them "of involvement in more sophisticated prostitution-based robberies". They cited a case in which two criminals from a neighbouring country had apparently pretended to be prostitutes and had robbed people of their cars and other belongings. The respondents claimed that when the police began looking for them, the criminals had already left for South Africa.

Four members of the focus group and a number of other prostitutes in the city centre claimed that about 100 prostitutes they had operated with over the years, both in Windhoek and in Walvis Bay, had been murdered by unknown people and for unknown reasons. There is a continuing hunt for a "suspected serial killer on the loose" believed to be responsible for a spate of prostitute murders during the later

part of 2005 (Terblanche 2006:1), while regular media reports of dead bodies found in river beds and elsewhere (The Namibian, 9 August 2006:3) lend some credence to these expressed concerns. Furthermore, although the Namibian Police could not provide reliable statistics, they confirmed this picture. According to Van Wyk (2006:3), New Era reports on around 700 rape cases each year. Tjaronda (2006:1) of New Era estimates that approximately 20,000 cases go unreported a year. This translates into two cases of rape in Namibia per hour. This trend is not only limited to Namibia. During World Women's Day on 8 March 2006, the United Nations Population Fund reported unprecedented growth in cases of femicide and violence against women worldwide, whether associated with sexual exploitation or domestic violence. For instance, 2,300 Guatemalan women were reported brutally murdered during 2005 alone. One of the leaders of women's groups in the country, Indira Lakshmanan (2006:1), bemoaned that "housewives, teenagers, and college students have disappeared and later been found naked, disemboweled, sexually mutilated, beheaded, and dumped in abandoned lots". Similar stories were reported from Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Peru (ibid.). Most unfortunately, these gender-related crimes are now generally attributed to what is believed to be the male counteraction to women's newly found independence.

6.5 Pornography

As regards pornography, 67% of this research's respondents had encountered it in their prostitution ventures, mainly through their customers (54%).



6.6 Health hazards

Beyond violence and criminality, the prostitutes' 'career' severely affects their reproductive health and exposes them to STDs, including HIV infection. Unsafe sex is rampant: 83% of the interviewees reported either no usage of condoms at all, or irregular usage due either to condoms tearing or to their customers' preference for sex without condoms.

Of the close to 1,240 subjects tested for HIV in one year through the Catholic Mission's "Stand Together" project, which has been working with female prostitutes and other vulnerable women in Windhoek for the last 15 years, 70% were HIV-positive (Ahrens 2006:9). Some 71% of the current study's respondents had suffered a major illness, and 60% of the 71% who had suffered such an illness specified that this illness had been some kind of STD, namely gonorrhoea or syphilis.

6.7 Childbearing and parenthood

Statistically, prostitute mothers included in the sample population had given birth to 2.2 children each. Their offspring were between 2 months and 24 years of age, the majority (55%) being below 10 years of age. Some 39% of the children attended school while 13% did not, although they were of school-going age. A total of 46% were too young to attend school. Only a minority of the prostitute mothers (31%) managed to raise their children themselves, whereas 65% left them with their fathers or with members of their extended family. Some 50% of the mothers contributed towards their children's maintenance, while only 14% of fathers did so.

7. CONTRADICTIONARY LAWS, POLICIES AND MORALS VIS-À-VIS THE REALITY

Namibia is renowned, both in Africa and internationally, for its outstanding human rights centred Constitution. Its entrenched Bill of Rights, which endeavours to introduce gender-neutral language and which forbids sex-based discrimination, grants its citizens wide-ranging constitutional rights, legal guidance and safety, while its exemplary policies aim to ensure equitable sexual and gender relationships. Under the Affirmative Action Employment Act, 1998 (No. 29 of 1998), Namibia has regulated the promotion of women's rights, while the Married Persons Equality Act, 1996 (No. 1 of 1996) provides for equality between partners in marriage (Hubbard 2000). Against this background, the findings of this research are disturbing because they leave little doubt about the normative setting and everyday social reality in the pervasiveness of the gendered world of prostitution in the capital city.

7.1 Legal instruments

Although prostitution itself is regarded as illegal under Namibian law, there is no specific law in terms of which to prosecute against it, although Shanghala (2000:4) points out that the Combating of Immoral Practices Act, 1980 (No. 21 of 1980) criminalises brothels, prostitution and immoral practices. The latter Act was brought into force in the pre-Independence era, and still applies today. Shanghala (ibid.) argues that the Act contravenes Namibia's Constitution and its Bill of Rights, which guarantees equal treatment and protection to all Namibian citizens irrespective of their race, colour, creed, or

²⁰ In July 2006, Ahrens (2006) wrote in an issue of Space magazine that HIV tests carried out among approximately 1,240 prostitutes and vulnerable women in Katutura by the "Stand Together" project over a period of one year had indicated that 70% were HIV-positive.



sex. Ironically, the police are not allowed to arrest a citizen on a charge of prostitution unless they are actually caught physically engaged in sex with a prostitute. Consequently, law enforcement agents usually arrest prostitutes on the pretext of public indecency, causing a public nuisance, and breaching public peace and order by loitering or trespassing. However, it is important to note that minors, defined by the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia (GRN 1990, cited in NID 2002:11) as children below 16 years of age, are generally protected by the law. It is “an offence for any adult to have, attempt to have, or solicit carnal (sexual) intercourse with a minor”, which, under the law, would be deemed as “committing an immoral or indecent act”, and whose punishment calls for “imprisonment for a period, not exceeding six years, or a fine, or both” (Shanghala 2000:9).

In the regional context of southern Africa, Namibia has ratified the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children, and the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (LAC 2002:9).

In the international arena, although the Namibian Government is a signatory to both the 1979 United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), it has not yet signed the associated Optional Protocol to CEDAW, which provides for redress and appeals. However, it has signed the following:

- The Optional Protocol to the UNCRC on the Sale of Children,

Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (UN 2000)

- The UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UN 2000)
- The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the Convention mentioned immediately above (UN 2000)
- The Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air, also supplementing the aforementioned Convention (UN 2000), and
- International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (ILO 1999).

7.2 Policies in place in Namibia

Namibia also has exemplary policy protections in place. According to Winterfeldt et al. (2002:137), the principal mission of the National Gender Policy (NGP) 2000–2005 is to improve awareness among policy-makers, planners, implementers, and others of the equal status of women and men. The NGP stresses equal partnership as a *sine qua non* in the country’s development process. NGP implementation lies with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, in collaboration with the following stakeholders: Gender Focal Points established in line ministries, the Gender Sectoral Committee, the Gender Commission, and the Gender Network Coordinating Committee.

7.3 The conflict with reality

In sum, the Namibian Government’s position on prostitution seems inconsistent. The political will to address gender- and sex-related societal contra-



dictions is obvious and indisputable. On the other hand, although prostitution is clearly rampant 17 years into independence, a legal framework that addresses the increasing commodification of sex is still represented only by a law passed in the apartheid era. It remains a fact that, to date, there is no actual law that relates to prostitution directly. Even where the Government has provided the necessary statutory and policy framework, as reported above, the Legislature has not yet succeeded in providing the practical instruments to curb sexual exploitation. This evident contradiction points to the deeper societal roots of prostitution. As necessary as all legislative and policy measures are, they still conflict with cultural attitudes, be they traditional or modern, the economic hardship, and the gendered power differentials, which cause, generate and consolidate prostitution. Sexual exploitation is certainly not dealt with exclusively by means of law or law enforcement, just as poverty cannot be dealt with by policing the poor. Namibian prostitution is a social problem: it reflects all the inconsistencies and contradictions of a post-apartheid, post-colonial, transitional society, which suffers from the dissociation of national and social liberation.

On the other hand, there are individual initiatives by Members of Parliament representing the ruling party to address the need for reform. This is best illustrated by Hon. Margaret Mensah-Williams's advocacy in this regard. On 7 July 2005, Denver Isaacs of the Namibian Newspaper (Friday October 7 2005) reported that Mensah-Williams had requested the Standing Committee on Gender, Youth and Information to urgently institute an in-depth investigation into

the plight of sex workers. She had been motivated by her personal visit to and meeting with prostitutes at Ausspannplatz. She strongly recommended that the Committee investigate areas from where sex workers operate, and look into cases where bottle stores, bars and shops sold liquor after hours. Mensah-Williams's parliamentary motion culminated in the question as to whether or not Namibia actually had proper legislation to deal with prostitution, as she felt that current laws only provided for the punishment of prostitutes, while those who exploited their services were not brought to book (Shanghala 2000:5).

From the foregoing, it is clear that prostitution, from a sociological point of view, still has to be demystified and its invisibility and the contradictions that surround it laid bare. This statement addresses the conflictual relationships between the prostitute, the customer, and society at large. From a conceptual perspective, the statement also emphasises the contrast between a liberal stance advocating for individual rights, freedoms, and equal opportunities on the one hand, and an alternative position demanding the regulatory intervention of the State to safeguard the safety, health, and lifespan of those who found themselves living on society's losing side. Contrary to the widely held view that women have a right to sell their bodies as they chose, and that they can actually engage in such trade safely and profitably, the direct interactions with the respondents of this research project, in several respects, relegates this perception to the realm of myth. For instance, the researchers did not meet a single financially successful, contented female prostitute, whether young or old. The amount of alcohol and drug



abuse, the violence and physical abuse, the physical and emotional trauma, the – oftentimes unwanted – HIV-positive pregnancies, the abject economic conditions, the hopelessness, and the sense of having no future were all painfully visible. The loss of human dignity that prostitutes suffer was evident everywhere. Indeed, this empirical evidence makes it plain that prostitution is not just about the act of selling and buying sex: the act of prostitution takes place within an exploitative setting, and thus, entails unequal distribution of resources among its combined wider range of social actors: vendors, customers, symbiotic partners, and legislation and law enforcement systems. Rather than being the mere act of selling and buying sex, prostitution exemplifies the constraints, the actual inexistence of choices and options, and the lack of power to make safe decisions about one's own and one's children's life. These in turn point to the lack of basic life-sustaining opportunities and resources and, hence, to poverty and social exclusion. One side of the coin is as dark as the other, depicting loneliness, frustration, deep-rooted anger, vengefulness, aggression, the lust for the physical and material subjugation of those weaker than oneself, the abuse of power, exploitation, and injustice.

Prostitution is sometimes conceptualised as sex work. The LAC study (2002:1) stated that many people preferred the term sex work because "it focuses on the act as a form of labour which is, like other forms of labour, subject to exploitation". The term intends to turn attention away from moral judgment and towards practical problems, like unsafe and unfair working conditions. It emphasises the fact that sex work is an activity and not an

identity. However, ordinarily, the term work in the process of human development entails the generation of income to facilitate an improved quality of life; that is, the more one worked and the harder one did so, the higher one's income was expected to be, and the better one's social status. It also entails the availability of adequate physical and material protection. But in the case of prostitution, this reference to work masks the amount of health hazards, substance abuse, violence, crime, injustice, exploitation, and the curtailed lifespan that go hand in hand with it. Prostitution inevitably hinders or counters the process of improving one's quality of life. It destroys tried and tested societal support structures and systems that normally facilitate safe and viable business; it drives the social actors involved into illegality, and it marginalises them. To date, as visible as prostitution is for those who want to see it, the prostitute remains largely invisible. Yet, ironically, once perceived, the prostitute is seen to be dangerous and, in the midst of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as a great health hazard and threat to life. On Thursday, 22 June 2006, Petronella Sibeene (2006) of the New Era newspaper quoted the Minister of Works, Transport and Communication, Hon. Joel Kapanda, as having called on the Namibia Business Coalition on AIDS (NABCOA) to extend its existing HIV/AIDS campaign activities to all segments of the transport sector, and to include prostitution – believed to be rife in that sector, as well as rural areas – "as young sex workers come from villages where they later return". The Minister was concerned that the "high unemployment rate in the country, currently standing at over 35%, put the high number of young people seeking employment at great

²¹ Minister Kaapanda was addressing a breakfast meeting of transport operators from Government, parastatals, the business sector, and other stakeholders on 21 June 2006.



risk of contracting HIV". In this vein, the study finds that under these circumstances, prostitution cannot possibly be regarded as a career or profession in the usual sense associated with work, which would entail a measure of mental, physical and social expertise, of knowledge and skills that facilitate human advancement. In Africa in general and in Namibia in particular, the causes of prostitution as well as the circumstances and the environment that facilitate it do not qualify it to be regarded as 'work' or a 'career' – let alone a 'profession'. Consequently, until such time as prostitution becomes a safe, just, life-sustaining venture, its legality will continue to be questioned.

This lack of adequate justification to refer to prostitution as work is emphasised by the research findings: the influence of religious institutions and religious morals on prostitution, both from the prostitutes' and society's perspectives. From an institutional point of view, it is important to note that churches and religious movements sometimes oppose gender-related legal reforms on the basis of ethical considerations. For example, in Namibia, most religious leaders took a public stand against the proposed Abortion and Sterilisation Bill (Hubbard 2000). On the other hand, this research project witnessed that the only two practical interventions targeting prostitutes since independence have so far come from religious institutions. It is also pertinent to mention here that it was with the support and assistance of the CCN that links were established with the focus group prostitutes that helped carry out this research project.

To date, prostitution in Namibia has seen very limited interventions. The Catholic Mission's "Stand Together" project under the leadership of Father Hermann Klein-Hitpass has been providing Katutura-based prostitutes and other vulnerable women with food, clothing and spiritual support for over ten years. Recently, the CCN ran a training programme in home-based care for 28 prostitutes to provide support services to prostitutes living with HIV/AIDS. This research project has served as a starting point for 10 prostitutes (9 women and 1 man) who were trained in "Street Outreach" techniques and methodologies. The CCN, together with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare and WAD, will support them in continuing their work.

Many prostitutes in Windhoek were also found to be quite spiritual. They indicated that before they proceeded to their respective prostitution errands they prayed for successful business and God's protection. They insisted on having their "fatherless children" baptised. They also reported that they drew a good number of customers from the premises of religious institutions. During the focus group discussions, some of them stated that they drew inspiration from the biblical prostitute, Mary Magdalene. They stressed that "He even rebuked the public that condemned her" social standing, and that "He forgave her". Others refer to the life story of the Old Testament's prostitute Delilah, who conquered the mighty Samson. They stated that Jesus Christ Himself was born of an unmarried mother, and that as much as they recognised that prostitution was a 'sin' in society, sin itself originated from Eve in the Garden of Eden. At times, the

²² One street prostitute related that when she went to church, she made sure she had condoms with her just in case she found a customer at church. Another respondent explained how her pastor had demanded sexual services from her when she had gone for counselling. Homosexual prostitutes displayed photos of their Catholic priest customers.

²³ Address at the CCN Home-based Care Training Workshop in Windhoek on 24 May 2006.



researchers witnessed a subtle intimate reconciliation between prostitution and spiritualism.

However, CCN Secretary-General Rev. Phillip Strydom, described “the social and moral situation in the country” as “disappointing” during an address to participants of an HIV/AIDS Home-based Care Training Workshop in which some of the members of the focus group had participated. At the Workshop, which was held a few weeks before the commencement of this research, Rev. Strydom stated that “Namibia, as a Christian nation that boasts over 90% of the entire population being of a Christian creed, should be free of vices such as prostitution and crime”.

8. RETHINKING PROSTITUTION AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Sociological studies (e.g. Scott & Marshal 2005:529) indicate that the “provision of sexual favours for financial reward has probably been institutionalised in the form of prostitution in every society that has had a coinage”. As this research was able to confirm, although prostitution has nearly always involved sexual favours traded by women to male customers, male prostitution, especially to male clients, is not uncommon. As Scott and Marshal (2005:529) report, Kingsley Davis proposed a functional theory that perceives prostitution as a safety valve, helping maintain the respectability of marriage. Noteworthy too, is St Thomas Aquinas’s historical description of prostitution in society: “Prostitution is like the filth in the sea, or a sewer in a palace. Take away the sewer, and you will fill the palace with pollution. ... Take away prostitutes from the world and you will fill it with sodomy” (Shanghala 2000:4). Thus, from a historical perspective at

least, it is clear that prostitution is intertwined with human sexuality.

In the case of Namibia, through prostitution’s demonstrated push factors and the prevailing circumstances within the prostitution world itself, the respondents of this Windhoek-based research were able to exhibit the differences between the vendors and customers of prostitution.

The results of this research have served to demonstrate that prostitution, as a human social activity, is expressed through the medium of power, and that power is unequally distributed amongst the social actors involved in the process of prostitution. Whereas prostitution customers are motivated by their drive for sexual satisfaction, they also enjoy the privilege of affording such a ‘luxury’ since their economic status is generally higher than that of their female counterparts – irrespective of their (male) social standing. Some 86% of the respondents highlighted financial difficulties as the main reason for taking up prostitution. A total of 60% had suffered sexually transmitted diseases during their time as prostitutes. Many lamented their HIV-positive status, and others expressed fear of the high possibility of contracting the virus. Thus, in Windhoek – and from the observations made among prostitutes in Oshakati and Oshikango – prostitution exposes its vendors to high levels of violence and health hazards.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Against this background, the core of prostitution is not sex. Hodson (2002:55), for example, categorises prostitution among “illegal goods and services”



when he argues that “we have very little useful information on the production of illegal goods and services such as prostitution, gambling, illegal drugs, or weapons”. Indeed, the many observations made during the outreach sessions of this research clearly demonstrate that there is nothing sexy about a seemingly sane adult man of means who has carnal intercourse with a drunk street woman of no fixed abode, whose body is nothing but wounds and scars, and shares her with a street boy, an alcoholic and violent pimp, an HIV-infected truck driver, and dogs and snakes. Similarly, prostitution is clearly not about pleasure and enjoyment. What pleasure can there be in a three-minute bout of sexual intercourse standing in the middle of a river bed, or lying on pieces of a cardboard box in a road drainage tunnel, surrounded by heaps of freshly used condoms, in an act which the partner, the prostitute herself, deeply dreads, and only does for the money she is paid?

Coupled with the undisputable gendered inequalities and exploitation that Karl Marx (cited in Giddens 2005:670) described as the “appropriation of women’s bodies and sexuality enshrined in the patriarchal system” that converts a woman into a “form of property owned by men”, this research was able to demonstrate that sex in prostitution must and should be interpreted for what it really is: an act of mental, physical, and economic domination, exerted upon those perceived to be physically, socially and economically weak. Sex in prostitution establishes a commodified social relationship of utmost gender inequality; according to Giddens (2005:131), “modern-time prostitution has and continues to wear an invisible face”. Through prostitution, the prostitution customer asserts his/her economic

and physical superiority. These differences clearly indicate that prostitution is simply a tool of power, control and exploitation of the socially and economically vulnerable, weak, and marginalised, whom Giddens (2005: 310) defines as those who “lack the basic conditions that must be met in order to sustain a physically healthy existence” by the economically strong. The kind of exploitation and degradation that 93% of the respondents – including male prostitutes – wished to run away from if they could: with 44% aspiring to receive training in certain skills, 18% to return to school, 14% to start a business, 9% to be rehabilitated, and 8% to find “real work”. Inevitably, therefore, prostitution relies and thrives on the evident social stratification between the socially privileged and the socially underprivileged and, consequently, cements social inequality and injustices. This social inequality is indeed embedded in the new social stratum that Tapscott (1995:164) refers to as “a new underclass” – perfectly adapted to Namibia’s economically imbalanced capitalist mode of production, and characteristic of neo-colonial societies that exhibit dependence on their former colonisers, rapid social stratification and elitism.

A further complication is that, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which the Republic of Namibia is a signatory, the 21% young women between 15 and 19 years of age involved in the city’s ‘sale of the flesh’ activities are actually of school-going age, i.e. they are supposed to be in school and not on the street, selling their bodies. Similarly, the Government’s National Youth Policy (GRN 2006:4) categorises the youth as “an essential national resource” who are supposed to be involved in activities that add value to national building. Hon John



Mutorwa, the Minister of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture, believes the following: "Young people in our community, therefore, should be seen as growing assets of the nation with a quest for the acquisition of status that accompanies it" (Youth Matters 2006:1). This in effect means that the 52% youths (15 to 30 years of age) who this research found in street prostitution are expected to be involved in useful national activities and programmes, which means that in fact the issue of prostitution goes far beyond exploitation and abuse. Consequently, it is a national social, economic and political issue and challenge, particularly in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Through this study, the researcher was able to delve into the social and legal circumstances of a small segment of Windhoek city's "new underclass" (Tapscott 1995:165) – prostitutes, whose social and economic stratification is gender-based. Here in their day and night street life, these young women suffer alienation and exclusion from the rest of society, principally because they are female, a situation that determines how they access or are denied life's opportunities. Through the debate commenced in this study, an attempt has been made to gaze beyond the prostitution horizon, to manifest the reality that genuine and sustainable development – that effectively delivers an improved quality of life for all in Namibian society, like in any other human society – will only become a reality when women's current subordinate position in all spheres of life is fully acknowledged by the public at large and elevated to that of men. This includes the areas of employment, education, health, access to land and other basic human empowerment essentials such as finance. This study

has further demonstrated the need for society as a whole, and particularly men, to acknowledge that some social attitudes and customs still discriminate against women and impede their development. Generally, men are still reluctant to change their attitudes towards the obvious subjection of women in society. As long as such attitudes and practices prevail, a genderless society may for now remain highly improbable, although it presents the inevitable ideal blueprint for human association: the dream of a society where both males and females enjoy life's opportunities and amenities without hindrance ascribed to their biological make-up; where the two sexes respect one another's space, aspirations, ambitions, needs, and desires; a society in which both have faith, hope and joy, and whose environment provides them with an opportunity to exploit their potential to the full for the benefit not only of themselves as individuals, but for society as a whole.

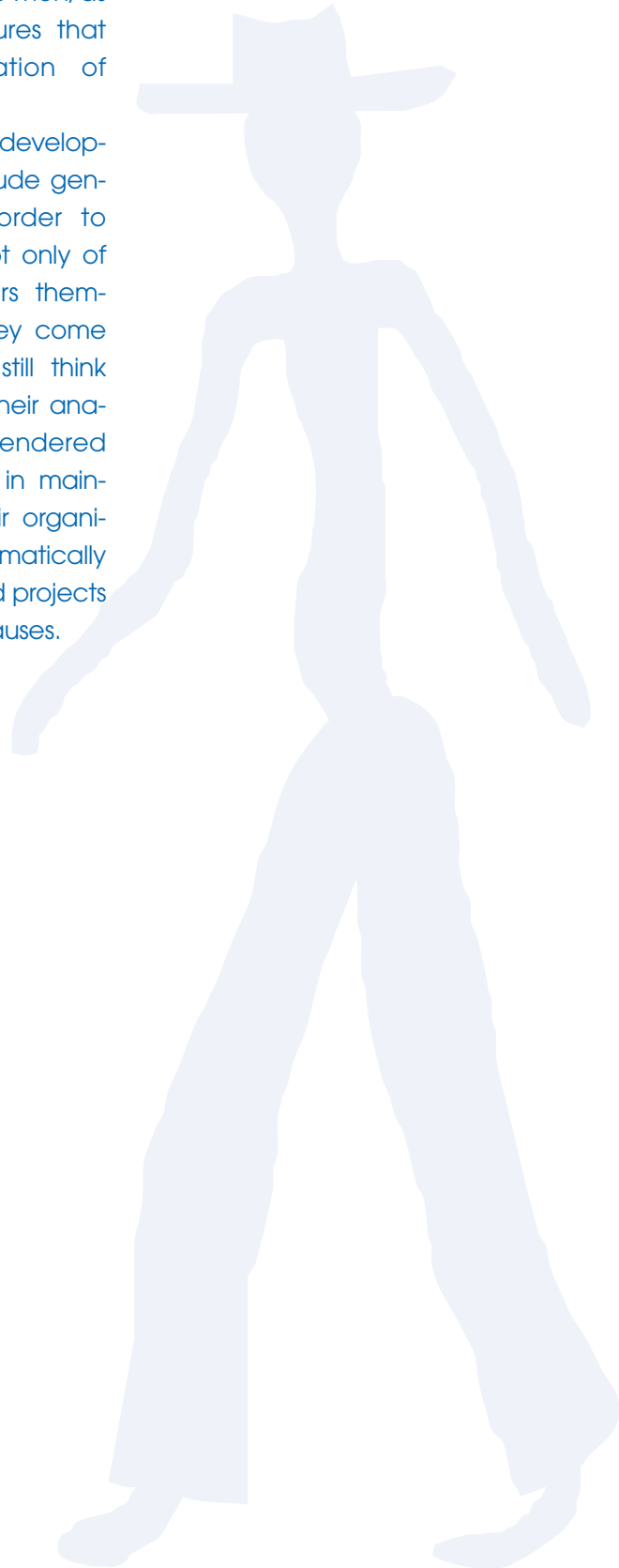
In order to meaningfully improve the social and economic status of women in Namibia, in Africa, and in the world, and consequently to prevent the sexual exploitation of children and women and ensure their protection, a number of critical issues will need to be seriously addressed:

1. Socio-cultural attitudes normatively shaping the roles of men and women in society will have to change.
2. Since these attitudes are deeply rooted in ethical values, cultural traditions, social norms and practices, it will be important for strategies aimed at causing an effective change to target children at an early age. Such an approach requires that gender be integrated into the school curriculum



so that it becomes part and parcel of the learning process.

3. Strategic and practical gender needs should be identified, i.e. those needs aiming at neutralising women's subordination to men, as well as concrete measures that will improve the situation of women.
4. All courses designed for development workers should include gender mainstreaming in order to change the attitudes, not only of the development workers themselves, but also those they come into contact with who still think along gendered paths. Their analytical knowledge of gendered structures and their skills in mainstreaming gender in their organisations need to be systematically built into programmes and projects that relate to women's causes.



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DEFINITIONS

child: Every human being below the age of 18 years (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child UNICEF 1990:45).

child labour: Comprises all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict as well as the use, procurement or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography, or for pornographic performances (ILO 1999:5).

commercial sexual exploitation: The use of a person for sexual purposes in exchange for cash or favours in kind. It entails interaction between the child or adult, the customer, and the intermediary or agent and others who profit from the trade. Includes prostitution, exotic dancing, pornography, computer exploitation, erotic massage and trafficking for sexual purposes.

destitution: A state of helplessness and hopelessness.

gender: The cultural/societal normativeness of a person's sex.

globalisation: The process of linking the world's societal, economic, cultural and political systems and activities, within a system of inequality.

human trafficking: The United Nations Optional Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (UNOP) defined this business as the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons by means of threat or

use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power, or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purposes of exploitation" (UN 2000).

paedophile: A person who recruits children and young people for sexual abuse and exploitation (ECPAT 1996:5).

pornography: Any visual or audio material which uses people in a sexual context. It consists of the "visual depiction of a person engaged in explicit sexual conduct, real or simulated, or the lewd exhibition of the genitals intended for the sexual gratification of the user, and involves the production, distribution and/or use of such material" (ECPAT 1996:10).

poverty: Both absolute and relative deprivation; limitation to life-saving opportunities, equivalent with social exclusion from access to societal resources (MAPODE 2003:1).

poverty line: Commonly, living under US\$1 a day.

prostitution: The act of engaging or offering the services of a person to perform sexual acts for money (ECPAT 1996:6).

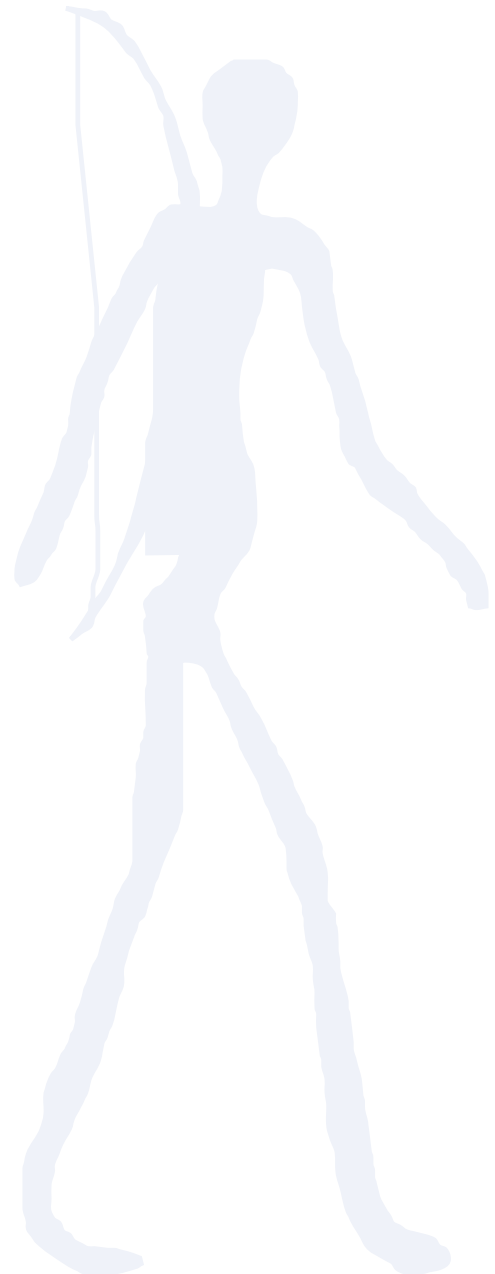
slave: A person who is owned by another and obliged to work for that person without pay.

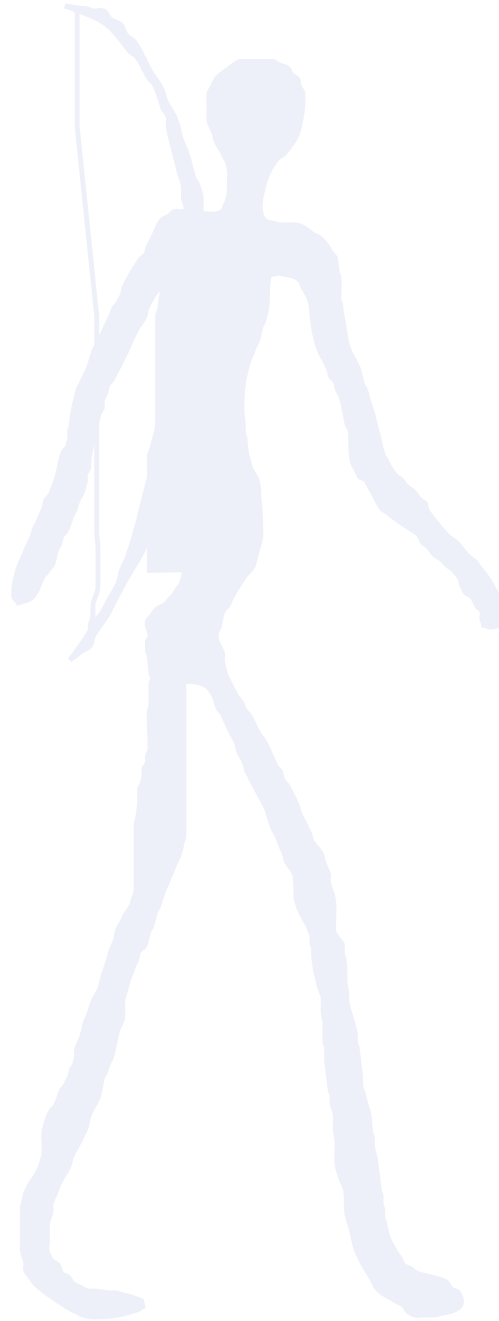
slavery: An institutional arrangement of coerced labour. It includes debt bondage, serfdom, forced or servile marriage, and delivery of children for exploitation.

youth: Persons between 15 and 30 (Winterfeldt et al. 2002:179).

**ABBREVIATIONS**

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CCN	Council of Churches in Namibia
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
LAC	Legal Assistance Centre
MAPODE	Movement of Community Action for the Prevention and Protection of Young People against Poverty, Destitution, Diseases and Exploitation
NGP	National Gender Policy
NID	Namibia Institute for Democracy
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNOP	United Nations Optional Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children
WAD	Women's Action for Development





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