1915, Nigeria: British colonial officers pass the following measures to deal with the "free women" or karuwai in the city of Katsina: "Prostitutes to be driven away. Natives of town to be given seven days to marry...(Pittin 1979:284).

1948, Kenya: Large numbers of Nandi women had migrated as prostitutes into the big towns of Kenya during the 1930s and '40s: "Many prostitutes returned to Nandi with their earnings, bought land and cattle, and resettled in Nandi as independent householders.... The apparent attractiveness of this potentially economically profitable option led to concern among Nandi men over loss of control over women. In 1948, the Local Native Council passed the so-called Lost Women Ordinance, which stipulated:

(I) No Nandi woman or girl over the age of 12 years shall travel from the Nandi District to any place outside the Nandi District without the written permission of the Chief. (II) No African driver of any vehicle shall convey in any such vehicle any woman or girl from the Nandi District to any place outside the Nandi District unless such woman or girl is in possession of a valid permit to travel by her Chief....

The ordinance was of limited effectiveness" (Oboler 1985:174).

1960s, Kenya: The Luo Welfare Association of Mombasa "uses force to capture, secure and transport a woman back to her home (village) if she steps out of line. There are no Luo prostitutes in Mombasa" (Wilson, 1961: 111).

1970s, 1980s, Zimbabwe, Gabon, Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Burkina

Faso, etc.: Police raids to “clean up” cities are reported. Women unable to prove that they are married are rounded up as prostitutes and subjected to various forms of abuse. These are only a few examples of the repression that African women face when they pursue independent existence outside of marriage. Who are these women, why do they leave their villages and settle in the cities?

“When a woman has left her village alone, it means she has had to do it,” says a prostitute of Foulankoiria (Niamey, Niger), “and that she has the desire to try other experiences that she hopes will be happier.” Some common stories:

Mariama (Hausa woman/Niger) is about thirteen years old when she is forced to marry by her family. Her husband beats her and rapes her. This goes on for some time. “Marriage, you have to do it to know what it is.” She finally runs away to a nearby city.

Rachida (Beri-Beri woman/Niger) leaves her marriage because of quarrels with her cowives, goes to a city.

Fatoumata (Peul woman/Nigeria) is deserted by her husband after twenty years of marriage. Life with her in-laws becomes unbearable and one day she secretly escapes, taking only a kerchief and the money for bus fare to Niamey.

Many women leave their villages because they are widowed, divorced or repudiated and have to find some way to survive. Others go away because their husband doesn’t provide for them. They migrate to escape an intolerable marriage, to avoid being beaten by a husband or being forced into another marriage, to get out of the control of their families, and/or to get economic autonomy. Some have to move far away, and might then gradually reestablish ties with their families. And cities are the places where most opportunities are available. “ ‘Town air makes free,’ ” is an old saying very relevant to the motives of many women migrating into African towns (Bujra 1975: 220).

Sex Is All Women’s Work

There are not many jobs accessible to women and few are well-paid. In the cities, women earn a living by waitressing, beer brewing, petty trade and other small businesses. A few, among those who have some education, get into white-collar jobs. In addition, all women can supplement their income or make a living entirely by engaging in different kinds of sexual-economic exchange. This exchange lies along a continuum from marriage to occasional or longer lasting relations with friends, “paying fiancés,” “subscription lovers,” and regular clients. As the Hausa people of Niger put it: “Women’s only livelihood is their sex” (Echard et. al., 1981: 345). And
sex is "women's work" in the village as well as in the city. In the villages, giving sexual service is integrated with the other services women give in marriage: domestic labor, reproduction, and all the tasks allotted to women by the sexual division of labor (water-carrying, wood-collecting, grain-pounding, farming, etc.). In the cities, sexual service can be in the context of marriage or it can be in a variety of other relations, sometimes including domestic labor and sometimes not. There is a continuum of forms of sexual service, not a dichotomy between marriage and the other relations implying sexual-economic exchange. In any case, the woman is giving sexual service and the man is paying, be it in money, food, rent, clothes, jobs, or access to various resources (farming land for example) and so on. How much the man cares is assumed to be shown in the amount he gives. For instance, among the Ashanti of Ghana:

The transfer of food or money from man to woman occupies a central place in marriage and lover relationships in Ashanti. "Chop money," the Ghanaian-English phrase for "money for food," is the subject of much marital strife...Sisters living together and in a position to observe the contents of each other's cooking pot are easily aware of how well each is supported by her husband or lover.... "Chop money" is both a practical economic arrangement and a symbol of love. A man's interest in a woman is indicated by how much effort he makes to supply her with her needs (Abu 1983: 160-161).

The economic transaction is central to the relation between the sexes and to the sexual relation itself. Money or gifts are not only a sign of men's power but also a way to measure eroticism. One small example: In Niger there are different kinds of aphrodisiacs in powder or cream that women use to make the vagina tighter and stimulate pleasure, mainly men's pleasure. The "free women" (the wey kuru, to use the Zarma term), the divorced or widowed women who live independently and give sexual service to men and who like to be well kept, use the aphrodisiacs (and so do wives sometimes). The most powerful aphrodisiac is very expensive. It is a cream called "car, villa, or trip to Mecca." A tiny jar of it costs a third of a white collar worker's monthly salary, a dip of it (one-night dose) would cost the equivalent of a day's pay. Women tell me its effects: "Once a man mounts, he won't be able to stop and he'll say, 'That's good, that's good', and he'll cry out, 'WHAT DO YOU WANT? A CAR, A VILLA, OR A TRIP TO MECCA?'

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One aspect along the continuum of sexual service concerns time length; there is a whole range of sexual-economic relations between the two extremes of lifelong marriage and a few minutes intercourse in prostitution. The women of Mathare (a poor
area of Nairobi, Kenya), for instance, who make their living by brewing beer also
"have a variety of sexual relationships with men that vary in duration and in the
directness with which payment changes hands. They (the relationships) form a
continuum from something called ‘Quick Service’ (a twenty-minute stint) to a form
of ‘Town Marriage’ that could last for years” (Nelson 1987: 225).

Let’s take another example: the institutionalized relation called “temporary
marriage.” Both in Africa (in Ethiopia for example) or outside of Africa (as in Iran) a
man can contract a “temporary marriage” with a woman to whom he pays a salary for
her conjugal services. It can last a day, a month, a year, etc., and the contract can be
renewed with new payment. Children born of this union are supposed to have some
formal rights as heirs; temporary marriage, as opposed to prostitution, is thus a
completely legal relation. On the other hand, like prostitution, it is a commercial
contract with explicit negotiation and, above all, explicit payment for the services to
the woman herself. Another well-known situation that can vary widely in duration
(and explicitness of negotiation) is that of the mistress or “kept woman.”

A second aspect of the continuum regards the woman in sexual economic
relations. In the course of their lives, women frequently alternate periods of marriage
with periods of sexual service to more or less steady clients or boyfriends who pay
with gifts or a fee. Many women I interviewed in Niger of different ethnic groups
(Hausa, Peul, Zarma, Tuareg) had careers in and out of marriage and in and out of
explicit sexual service. This pattern is particularly clear for the Hausa women both in
Niger and Nigeria who are called karuwai. A karuwa is “a woman who is living with
neither her husband, nor her parents or other kin, and who is dependent, totally or in
part, upon gifts from one or more men, for whom she provides sexual services” (Pittin,

As to the life patterns of a karuwa:

All the women [of the over 500 karuwai the researcher interviewed in Katsina,
Nigeria] had been married at least once before beginning karuwanci (occupa-
tion of karuwai), and doubtless most would marry again; an important
feature of karuwanci is its optional nature. Not only do karuwai remarry but
also they may well marry men who are wealthier, and of higher social status,
than the men they left behind in the village (Ibid, 294).

Karuwanci, especially in combination with some commercial activity on the
side can also lead to complete economic independence from men (Pittin
1979).

The life of Amina is one story like many others: “I left M. [a town in the north]
not because of hunger but because of marriage.” Her first marriage was a forced
marriage. She was only thirteen. She ran away from her husband’s house several
times. Her husband forced sex on her. “I even had a baby in his house. Even then I
tried to escape... The child was a year and seven months old when I abandoned him at his father's home.” And then, “they [the family] again wanted to marry me, to another man. So that’s why I left.” She went to the city and became a karuwa. She married a second time and had four children. Her husband died and she became a karuwa again for five years. She married a third time and had three children. Upon divorce she decided to get out of sexual service entirely. “I’m not a wife, I’m not a whore.” She became a trader, went to Mecca, leads a “wise life,” “no more dirt on my body.”

This moving between marriage and other sexual relations like karuwanci is not true for only a few isolated women. Women I interviewed in Niamey were quite clear about the fact that selling sexual service was a common situation for divorcées and widows; it is expected that wey kuru live or at least get a lot of help from men’s “gifts.” The Zarma word wey kuru itself means both “divorcée” and “prostitute”:

The divorced woman is called wey kuru, a term which by extension has come to designate the prostitute. This is quite understandable as only the repudiated or widowed woman can at any moment receive a man’s visit. Be she a widow or a divorcée, she is a virtual prostitute even if she is not an actual one (Diarra 1971: 57, emphasis added).

Giving sexual service in exchange for a compensation does not distinguish a “free woman” from a wife; as noted for the Hausa women in Nigeria, “any woman expects to benefit economically from her man be he husband, suitor, or lover... Women do not bestow their bodies, their time, and their lives gratis; they expect some recompense” (Pittin, 1979: 354). Women of different ethnic groups I talked with in Niamey, and not only the poorer women but also white collar workers, told me they would not waste their time with a man who gave them nothing. One of the “free women” I interviewed, a forty-year-old employee, said, “What would I be doing with a man who doesn’t give me anything? You can always find a guy to sleep with. But I won’t lose my time with him if he doesn’t bring me anything, if he doesn’t help me.”

And Hadiza (twenty-four years old, high school education; married once and deserted, two children, works in bars):

Love and money, they go together for me. Even if I like a man and I desire to be with him the first time, if the second or third time he doesn’t give me anything, it’s over. I want the money. My boyfriend understands that now. When he sees me he offers me his wallet. He says, “You, it’s always money you want.” That’s it. If he doesn’t give me money who is going to feed me, who is going to pay for the things I need? [What if you marry and your husband doesn’t have money?] If he doesn’t have money, he can let me go, divorce. I’ll go to bed with someone who will give me money.
The same attitude is among young white-collar workers who immigrated to Accra from several small towns of Ghana (Dinan 1983). In this case it is not women between marriages or after marriages entering sexual relations to support themselves but women who, despite the high pressure to marry coming from the families and the media, had chosen to remain single. They integrate their salaries with all sorts of allowances from boyfriends, patrons and "sugar daddies" in exchange for their sexual services. This pattern of educated and semiskilled women postponing or evading marriages and promoting their career and financial interests with sexual relations is common in many African cities and is the object of frequent attacks from the press. For example, in Ghana they are branded as "selfish, worldly, irresponsible, sexually promiscuous, and grasping" (Ibid: 362).

A "free woman" can become a wife and a wife can become a "free woman." Because of this frequent change in situation and because of the admitted commonalities of sexual-economic exchange, "free women" and wives are not isolated from each other. This lack of separation between women involved in different forms of sexual service is clear in everyday life. During my interviews in Niamey women who had led regular married lives were often sitting and chatting with their friends who were quite explicitly prostitutes. It would not be correct, however, to think that no stigma is attached to explicit sex work. It is, and the more explicit the negotiation of money for service, the more stigma there is. It is also due to stigma that women try to go back to marriage, stigma on themselves and, in many ethnic groups, stigma on their children born out of marriage. Marriage is considered the ideal relation, that which is socially validated. Great pressure, often very great pressure, is put on women to make them marry and stay married.

The continuum of sexual exchange is present also in the kinds of services given. The variety of relations and the services they involve is so great that researchers have difficulty defining them. They speak of quasi-uxorial relations, not completely commercialized relations and so on; these relations don't fit the image of prostitution as sex work with fixed fee, a fixed time, and explicitly negotiated services.

Take prostitution in Nairobi in the 1920s and 30s. One form of prostitution was that of the malaya. Malaya is the common Swahili term for prostitute. But in the early days of Nairobi the term malaya defined one particular way of selling sexual service, as opposed both to street walking, i.e. wetembezi prostitution, and to the explicit soliciting and setting of prices for sexual service separate from domestic service of the wazi wazi prostitutes. The malaya worked in their houses where they waited for their clients:

In addition to sexual intercourse, prostitutes sold individual domestic tasks, or sets of tasks...For a portion of a man's wage, prostitutes routinely provided bed space...cleaning, cooking, bathwater, companionship, hot meals, cold
meals, and tea, and adhered to an ideology of sexual relations in which women were unfailingly deferential and polite (White 1986: 256).

In other words, "malaya prostitution mimicked marriage" (Ibid: 258). Also today, the malaya of Mathare (Nairobi) define the sexual services they give as a "wife's work" and their short-term relations as a kind of "mini-marriage." But they see the domestic services men frequently request as something to be avoided if possible. As one malaya said:

I love "it" (sex) with a man I am attracted to, but I never let a man stay in my room until daylight. If they stay, they start wanting tea, and then food, and then before you know it, you are washing his clothes. I don't have time (Nelson 1977: 154).

One definition of a malaya is: "a wife that doesn't clean for her husband" (Ibid: 173). However, many explicit sexual economic relations of the malaya of Nairobi other than "Quick Service" continue to involve some domestic service (Nelson 1987: 225).

The malaya stress the differences between marriage and their present forms of sexual service (in the control of one's sexuality for example). A husband is considered "a barrier to one's freedom." But despite the malaya's degree of autonomy, their lives are not without danger. Police raids and client violence are threats against which they try to protect themselves by helping one another. Their solidarity is especially striking toward women arriving from the villages; newcomers are helped with lodging, utensils for beer brewing, and the teaching of skills (Nelson 1978).

Social stigma on the malaya is quite strong:

Because of their economic independence, their free sexual mores, and their rejection of the normative role for Kikuyu women (ethnic group of most Mathare malaya), Mathare women are stigmatized by others as bad women: parasites leading men astray with drink and sex...Indeed, Mathare is known as the "place of malaya" (Ibid: 89).

But to the women leaving their villages where life was impossible for them, widowed or deserted women or women escaping oppression and violence in marriage, Mathare is seen differently. These women go to Mathare "because they have heard that Mathare is 'a place of women' " (Ibid: 90).

What are the differences between the various forms of sexual-economic exchange and particularly between marriage and relations outside of marriage? What differences are crucial to women?
In marriage the husband acquires: (1) the right to direct physical usage of the person of the wife, i.e. sexual and reproductive usage (2) the right to (sometimes almost unlimited) usage of her labor. And in many societies the man can enforce these rights with rape, beatings, and so on. The set of exclusive rights men acquire over their wives makes marriage a relation of "private appropriation" (Guillaumin 1981) near to serfdom. But there is another basic point: Marriage is an exchange of women between groups of men. This exchange, or "traffic in women," as it has been defined (Rubin 1975), implies that women are not partners in the transaction, but are themselves the objects of the exchange which can involve payments (bride-price or bridewealth as they are called) from the man and/or his kin group to the woman's kin. And the meaning of these payments is becoming clearer to women who now start refusing them. In Zimbabwe (according to Gaidzanwa) women who have begun to contest bridewealth point out that if you have bridewealth paid for you, you are mortgaging your rights to your children and to yourself... In reaction, women who refuse to have bridewealth paid for them are considered "bad" women and accused of being prostitutes (Barry 1984: 35).

Marriage is obviously not the only case in which women are exchanged by men. There are many historical and ethnographic examples of "trafficking in women":

Women are given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favors, sent as a tribute, bought, and sold. Far from being confined to the "primitive" world, these practices seem only to become more pronounced and commercialized in the more "civilized" societies. Men are of course also trafficked—but as slaves, hustlers, athletic stars, serfs, or as some other catastrophic social status rather than as men. Women are transacted as slaves, serfs, prostitutes, but also simply as women (Rubin 1975: 175–76).

Marriage is the transaction in which women are trafficked "simply as women." Women who resist this trafficking are most often forced to migrate. Unlike the movement of women by men from one kinship group to another, this form of migration is an attempt to escape both subordination to a husband and kin control, that is the integrated "private" system of male domination. Women going to the cities leave relations where they are objects of exchange, where the length of the relation is indeterminate and the man acquires global rights over their body and their work; instead, they get into sexual-economic relations in which they are partners of the transaction and where specific services are negotiated. These differences between marriage and the other relations are so important that in many populations (like the Digo of Kenya to whom this quote refers)
an increasing number of young and middle age women leave their husband for a life outside any permanent or semi-permanent cohabitation, in which state they exchange sexuality for cash and kind with a great deal of individual freedom (Gomm 1972: 96).

They are so vital to the women that they sometimes buy their freedom by repaying the bride-price which ties them to marriage with the money earned as prostitutes (Ardener 1961; Wilson 1977).

Let's look at some individual experiences: "Free women" in Niamey and the malaya of Mathare compare their life in marriage with their life outside of it. They contrast the rights the husband had had on them with the control they now have over themselves. For malaya women this control over their bodies means also freedom to choose their sexual relations and the moment they want them. The same point was made by "free women" in Niamey: "Marriage is contracted before God...the woman must be subservient. (In karuwanci) I can choose the man I want...when you don't want to accept, you say 'no, go on your way.' "

Freedom from wife beating is another point made by both malaya and "free women." It is important to note that malaya of Nairobi, like the "free women" of Niamey and like many prostitutes throughout Africa, work independently and not under the control of men.

Many of the "free women" (both young and old) had started their marital careers with a forced marriage when they were very young, twelve to fifteen years old, sometimes even younger. In the city, especially when girls are going to school, marriage tends to be a little later; in the village marriage is most often around puberty. Of these first marriages, most are decided by parents and the young girls have no say.

It should be noted that Niger has adhered on December 1, 1961 to the United Nations Convention on the consent to marriage, the minimum age for marriage, and the registration of marriages, a convention which unfortunately in reality is not applied (Fourth Session of Congress of the Women's Association of Niger, 27-8/ier-9/84).

Custom and also Muslim law give the father the right to marry off his daughter as suits him. And there are traditionally established ways of breaking the girl’s resistance and making her “accept” her husband. For example, among the Zarma, her father or uncle take her to a field where she is forced to pound an enormous quantity of grain until she collapses from fatigue and agrees to consummate the marriage (Diarra 1971, see also Echard 1985 for the Hausa).

Cultural norms (as to how one speaks about marriage) and shame often made it difficult for the women I interviewed to talk about what forced marriage really means.
When I asked why they had divorced, they first told me things like: "A marriage, you know, there are problems..." "Well, it was a marriage my parents decided, I didn’t like him." Only after I got to know some women better, and I kept asking, did they tell that forced marriage is something that marks you forever, that it can be constant torture and rape:

I cried and cried; he took a knife and said, if I didn’t accept he would cut my throat (Beri-Beri woman). From the morning you don’t even want the sun to go down because you know what will happen after....Every day I had fear, I felt sick, I tried to escape. Every day I escaped to my parents and every day I am beaten and taken back....You are there, you see him pass, you feel contempt—you can’t stand the sight of him—and hate, yes hate. And then if you refuse him again, he will beat you and beat you and beat you (Zarma woman).

Girls run away, sometimes across kilometers and kilometers of savannah. Some hurt themselves badly: several older women showed me deep permanent scars from wounds they had gotten falling and stumbling during their flight. Also suicide is not uncommon in these cases, I’ve been told. All know that “a village marriage made by parents, that’s not easy to break.”

Marriage, even when it does not have the violence of forced marriage, gives the husband rights to women’s work. This includes the heavy tasks of water carrying, wood fetching, grain pounding, and the rest of domestic work such as cooking, washing, childcare, etc. In many African societies, also the bulk of agricultural work is done by women. As a result, the women in the villages are usually overworked. And frequent wife-beating to enforce obedience and service is so common that women get to consider it normal, almost unavoidable, male behavior. As Fati, a Hausa karuwa who had been beaten by several husbands, puts it, “Can you keep a man from beating? You can’t...men beat.” Women going to the cities, making a living through sexual service, react to this violence of men and to the rights men have over them. They react to forced intercourse. They react to too much work.

Find a husband in my village? No, I don’t want to go pound, uuh....I’ll pound, I’ll draw water, I’ll cook, all the work, ha, ha, ha...no, no, no, no. I’ll run away from the village....Down at the village there’s too much work. Here I have peace.

Migration patterns may differ. Some of the women I interviewed had first moved to towns in their area, lived there as “free women,” and eventually made their way to Niamey; others had gone directly to the bigger city, whether from some other region of Niger or from other West African countries. Life as a “free woman” is in fact almost
by definition linked to migration, or at least some form of leaving home. For karuwanci, for instance, "the spatial criterion is crucial in that a woman away from her husband and relatives is no longer controlled by them" (Pittin, 1983: 292). Statistics confirm this pattern.

Let’s take the example of Niamey in Niger and of Katsina in Nigeria. For Niamey some statistics are available for “declared prostitutes,” both professional prostitutes and part-time prostitutes working as waitresses or bar hostesses in restaurants, cafes, etc. In 1975, about one-fourth of the professional prostitutes and three-fourths of the part-time prostitutes came from other African countries (such as Nigeria, Togo, Benin, Ghana). Of the Niger prostitutes only a small minority were born in Niamey (Sidikou 1980: 194 ff.). For the prostitutes of Katsina (Pittin 1979: 234–42), considering the women in karuwanci less than eight percent were born or raised in the city of Katsina. Many of the prostitutes were from the province of Katsina and about a third to a fourth were from other regions of Nigeria. In the case of Katsina it appears clearly that the woman who will enter karuwanci goes “far enough from her home that neither will she be found and abducted by her kinsmen, nor will she be subject to the wrath and castigation” she would face if caught at the first moment of her flight. (But at the same time, the Katsina data show that these karuwai do not move to very distant places and tend to reestablish communication with their families after the initial period).

The fact that so many women choose to migrate to the city does not mean that city life and prostitution are easy for them: “Sometimes you don’t sleep at night because of all the problems,” says Kadidjatou, a Hausa woman about thirty-three years old. While I was interviewing her, people kept coming in to ask her to pay some debt or other or to take back something she had bought on credit and hadn’t been able to pay. Clients were few and she often had to accept them at the price they could give.

“If you say one thousand [francs CFA] and he says I don’t have it, I have only 500, you say let’s go. You take it because you cannot pass the night with nothing. You have to take it...Sometimes, one or two days you find no work.”

Kadidjatou tells me about her first marriage. She was eleven years old, she wasn’t menstruating yet. It was a forced marriage:

I refused to have sex, and that is why he used to beat me. I escaped all the time in the bush. I tried to hide. I refused the marriage. I suffered a lot in this marriage. It was because I was not used to having sex. All the time I run away and all the time my parents take me back. I escape, they take me back, I escape, they take me back. Then I ran away and went to stay with an old woman in F.[a town] in a compound of karuwai. She is a sort of magazia [leader] of karuwai. I live there and go on errands for them. They send me to buy food, beer.... When my parents find out that I am there, they come and take me back.

One night I jumped over the wall and escaped so they saw I just wouldn’t stay and they broke the marriage.
She goes to live in Niamey at an older karuwa’s house. The men come, give her “presents”: “I take the money, I go off to the bars. I ate up the money but I didn’t give, I refused to give them my ass. So the men when they come again the next day, they slap me, they beat me: ‘Why did you go off, you took the money...’” Kadidjatou is called into the house by the older karuwa and one of the men. “He managed to have sex with me. I screamed and screamed; at the end I gave in. That’s how I got used to karuwanci.” The older karuwa said, “‘Look, so and so, those are not ‘presents’ they give you. You have to have them taste it from time to time.’” Little by little I accepted. That’s how I got used to work as a karuwa.” She lives for a certain time at the older karuwa’s house, gives her most of her earnings, and gets room, food, and clothes.

She marries a second time and goes back to the village: “The second [husband] also beats me up. I work a lot. So I thought I’d leave, and I came again to Niamey.” After a new period of karuwanci, she marries a guy she loves. This husband deserts her. He disappears and she goes back to Niamey.

At this point, Kadidjatou feels she is autonomous: “I have my own house now. I’m independent. I’m not under anybody’s orders. What I earn is for me.” She has two children, and an old mother whom she brought from the village. Her children and her mother depend totally on her: “Even the soap I have to buy; food, it’s me; clothes, it’s me. I’m the meat, I’m the knife.”

Kadidjatou’s story is a grim one. It poses first of all one problem: What can be termed choice? Kadidjatou is raped into marriage and she is raped into prostitution. She then goes back and forth between these two poles, seeking the most livable or escaping the totally intolerable situation. What appears here from Kadidjatou’s voice and the voices of other women is the lack of any real alternative. Here and elsewhere, women depend on men both as individuals and as a group for their access to means of survival. This is the basic point. Women’s access to resources, especially where the great majority of women have no paid jobs, is largely dependent on some form of sexual service. Still, for some women giving sexual service outside of marriage can lead to an autonomy both on an economic and on a personal level that they can rarely reach otherwise. In any case, they escape the burden of (unpaid) domestic work and of the agricultural work they were forced to do in the marriage context.

There are great differences in how independent women use the money they get from men and in their economic success and in the autonomy they can achieve. We must keep in mind that I am not speaking only of the most explicit form of sexual service (street or bar full-time prostitution) but of the whole range of sexual-economic exchange out of marriage including part-time sexual service to supplement a salary.

On the economic level, relations of sexual service can go from those barely permitting subsistence, like that of Kadidjatou, to the better situation of prostitutes
working with foreigners, to that of well-to-do courtesans. Obviously the less urgent the economic need, the more choice the woman has as to the clients and working conditions she accepts and also as to what she can do with the money.

One use even women in the poorest kinds of prostitution make of money as soon as they can afford it is the stocking of furniture and other items (like cloth and sets of pans) both as savings and as generous gifts for their family on various occasions like marriages. This helps to keep their ties with their home community and can be important if they want to go back home. Showing how well one fares helps to get acceptance from the family.

Setting up a business is an ideal for many women and sometimes they manage to realize it. In Yaounde, Cameroon, for example, bars, restaurants, nightclubs, beauty parlors, and European ready-to-wear boutiques are largely set up by prostitutes and former prostitutes. Out of seventeen cafes in Yaounde, seven belong to prostitutes or ex-prostitutes and four of these are also restaurants. Of the twenty-five ready-to-wear boutiques, twelve belong to prostitutes or ex-prostitutes. And, prostitutes own the majority of beauty parlors (Songue 1986: 119–26).

Another very important way women use their money is buying houses, or buying plots of land and building houses in the cities and sometimes in the villages. In Nairobi (similar situations are known also for other cities like Kampala):

Through prostitution and beer brewing [women] accumulated savings which they invested in building or buying houses, and occasionally in petty trade. Their ability to accumulate savings in this way equalled or surpassed that of men in the earliest phase of Nairobi’s history, and until today women own half the houses in Nairobi’s oldest existing “African location,” Pumwani (Bujra 1975: 213).

House building is better security for a woman’s future than a marriage:

No wonder that one old woman, an ex-prostitute, when asked if she had ever been married, replied crossly, “Why do you insult me? My house is my husband” (Ibid: 224).

In Niamey, several women I interviewed had bought lots and were building houses for themselves. Some have bigger projects and get to build one house after another and rent them. Rich men’s “help” is instrumental in this operation. One woman speaks of herself and of other courtesans:

WE EAT MEN...I don’t do IT with just anybody, that is the point....“You want it, you’re going to suffer, I must eat you up thoroughly before you can get it.” He'll have to spend enormous amounts before getting me. He must
spend, buy me things, give me money, and I hold out, I don’t give him anything. [How do you manage to be so successful?] I don’t know, I myself can’t explain it. I think it’s a gift God has given me. I wonder sometimes...

So, with God on her side, she pursues her building project:

A man comes around. I tell him I have a problem....Recently, not even two months ago, a guy came in and I say, “Ah, I am building but I need some things.” He called me, I went to his place...he gave me 100,000 francs [CFA], bills of 10,000, 10,000...100,000!

And finally, even one of the most traditional male economic preserves, livestock, is bought by prostitutes. Aicha, a Peul woman from Niger, puts money she earns into cattle “for tomorrow,” thinking of her future children. Other women, like the Nandi prostitutes of Kenya, buy land and cattle and become independent family heads. And Nandi men feel menaced (see first page of this article). Control of women in marriage and exploitation of their labor is based on male monopoly of resources and means of production. When women have access to other forms of income, marriage and direct male control are threatened.

By entering relations of explicit sexual-economic exchange, women transgress the basic rules of their societies concerning the property of women’s persons. Women’s transgression and male reactions mark a breaking point in the continuum of sexual-economic exchange. Here we have an area of open political conflict between the sexes, an area where some important aspects of the relations between men and women are being redefined. Independent migration is a sign of women’s transgression. Family control against flight from marriage is reinforced by city and state institutions. Women in African cities often have no legitimacy other than as wives.

Repression

By using their bodies as tools in sex work, “free women” break the crucial link between men’s direct rights over women’s sexuality and reproductive power and their direct rights to women’s work which constitute the specificity of marriage. Through negotiating and getting paid for sexual service out of marriage, women try to achieve personal and economic autonomy. This is a threat to the structure of male power and the response to this threat is repression.

Women who are not under the direct control of a man are “outlaws.” Women in such illegitimate situations must be put back under a man’s control. Again and again “free women” are put into marriage. In Nigeria from 1915 on, for example in 1958, 1969, and 1972–73, many towns (Sokoto, Kano, Zaria, Katsina, and others) took a
A series of measures to make karuwai marry, banish karuwai, or otherwise force them to leave (Pittin 1979: 283-89). In 1958, in Katsina “an edict was passed that independent women should marry... The rapid, forced and extremely inexpensive marriages to the karuwai known as auren gwanjo (second-hand marriage: gwanjo means second-hand goods) could be completed for as little as ten shillings...” (Ibid: 286). In 1972-73 the karuwai face threats, physical assault, and destruction of their property in many towns. Karuwai are forced to leave the cities or marry. In Sokoto, within a few days of the Sultan’s appeal (May 1972) which “advised” them to marry, about 200 karuwai had gotten into marriages. In Katsina, in the two weeks following the eviction from their houses, about half of the karuwai had married. When things calm down, “the women gradually filter back into the cities, emerge from hiding, and leave marriages into which they were precipitately pushed” (Ibid: 283-89).

Women’s independent access to resources through sexual economic exchange out of marriage is stigmatized and punished; other independent activities, especially if they give women a good income, tend to be curtailed if not suppressed. One example: In Sefwi Wiawso State, Ghana, in the 1920s women’s agricultural work load had increased with the development of cocoa farming. Up to then women had disposed of the food crops they grew, but with cocoa the situation was different: cocoa was the husband’s property. Moreover, wives were denied rights to the cocoa farms on which they were investing years of labor. Opportunities for independent income were opening for women with the growth of market towns. Women left marriages and went to the towns; they became a concern to the state authorities.

The first, and perhaps most startling intervention of the State Council was to seek to stamp out the “free women” of Wiawso: the traders and alleged casual and full-time prostitutes who had abandoned their husbands or who had no known male guardians. The Free Women’s Marriage Proclamation, issued in 1929, ordered that such women were to be arrested, locked up in the outer courtyards of the omanhene’s palace in Wiawso and held there until they were claimed by a husband or by any other man who would take charge of them. The male claimant was required to pay a fine of 5/- to release the woman and to prevent her from carrying on her unacceptable activities (Roberts 1987: 61).

Among women’s unacceptable activities was controlling their daughters’ marriages and divorces and receiving bride-prices for them.⁸

Another case: In Zimbabwe in 1982-83, military sweeps arrested several thousand women. Women from different social classes and occupations were imprisoned in detention camps as prostitutes. The women picked up on the streets had to “produce proof of marriage if they wanted to be let free” (Gaidzanwa 1985). Drastic sweeps were conducted in Harare in an area inhabited by
young professional people, some of them being single black women. We understand that while some women arrested were prostitutes, many young women picked up were not. They felt they had been arrested because they were young, single, and showed evidence of earning their living (Jacobs and Howard 1987: 42).

In the detention camps, soldiers were reported to have sexually abused the women, as they considered them prostitutes. During the same period, other police measures prohibited the sale of cooked food. "It is notable that the definition of 'illegal'...has come to include some of the main means of income-generation for women" (Ibid: 42).

Finally repression appears in its rawest form: physical violence and rape are used as a punishment and as a radical "cure" for women who violate men's laws.

In Gabon in 1985, women who were said to be prostitutes were rounded up. These women were to be given to soldiers in the barracks to sleep with and presumably to cure them of their prostitute lifestyles (Gaidzanwa 1985: 3).

Traditional and modern states as well as family and local authorities try to restrict women's freedom of movement, deliver them to husbands, chase "free women" out of the cities and imprison them.

Migration is women's answer to unbearable situations of poverty and subordination. Leaving their homes, making their living on their own, facing male reactions and repression, women look for ways of surviving and of gaining some autonomy. In this sense, the history of African prostitutes, of African "free women," must be seen as a history of resistance.

Paris, July 1988

Notes

1. "Free women," or in French-speaking West Africa femmes libres, is the common term indicating an independent woman out of marriage, especially a divorced or widowed woman, and is also used as a synonym for prostitute (see, for instance, Sidikou 1980: 195n.)
2. Cited in Sidikou 1980: 197. All translations are mine.
3. Unreferenced quotes and information on Niger "free women" come from my field work and my interviews in Niamey in 1986.
4. To have accomplished a pilgrimage to Mecca gives a person social prestige and the title of hadji (male), hadjia (female), i.e. Meccan pilgrim, by which this person will be addressed from then on.
5. The effective extension of these rights and with it women's margin of control over their work and sexuality can vary in different societies and also in different kinds of marriage in one society. It must be also kept in mind that colonialism has generally led to a deterioration of women's situation.
It has undermined the areas of women's autonomy reinforcing (or, according to another view, creating) men's economic and general control (see Boserup 1970 for women's loss of rights to land). Some researchers link prostitution in non-Western countries to this process, which transformed the economic relations between the sexes (also in marriage) in a way that was detrimental to women. According to Etienne, women are transformed into "valuable commodities. This frequently leads to widespread prostitution, perhaps facilitated in some cases by precolonial standards of sexual freedom, but primarily determined by women's understanding of their generalized dependency on men and their desire to seek the least disadvantageous adjustment to it—for prostitution was often seen as preferable to marriage" (Etienne and Leacock 1980: 21). Etienne (1980: 214–38) gives an example for the Baule of Ivory Coast of the transformation of production relations in marriage and of the new dependency of wives on their husbands for access to cash and cloth, access women had independently before.

6. After independence of Niger from France, a police file was established for prostitutes. All prostitutes must be declared on this police file called “Fichier de Preservation Sociale” and they have to pass a medical test each month for VD (Sidikou 1980: 194). They are generally treated with antibiotics for prevention and they have to pay for all medical treatment.

While prostitution like that of karuwai or other women waiting for clients at their home doors is “tolerated” when the women are registered prostitutes who regularly pass their obligatory medical tests, streetwalkers, especially in the center of town, face police raids, fines and jail (up to one month I have been told).

7. Five hundred francs (CFA) is the standard price for intercourse in these poorer forms of prostitution. Women working in bars and nightclubs, especially with foreign clients, can get much higher fees.

8. This policy was not a peculiarity of Sefwi Wiawso. Other states in this area (Gold Coast) were taking similar measures (Roberts 1987). In the thirties, the Sefwi Wiawso State Council made other attempts at marriage reform and passed laws which “potentially eased men’s access to wives” (by lowering marriage costs) “and reduced wives’ alternatives to laboring on their husbands’ farms” (Ibid: 65–66).

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