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**Addressing the Bussinessification of Prostitution in Olongapo City Through Empowerment Model:  
A Preliminary Study**

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at the practice of prostitution in Olongapo city and how the sex workers are trapped in the business of prostitution because of poverty. The paper looks at the history and development of prostitution in Olongapo city and how it developed. Then, the paper will analyze the different attempts to combat prostitution in Olongapo. Finally, the paper argues that while legalization of prostitution and building a safer work condition would help the women of Olongapo, a better approach to address prostitution is to address the problem of poverty and gender inequality that is present in the Philippine society.

**Keywords:** Olongapo City, Prostitution, Women, Feminism, Poverty, Gender Inequality

## **Introduction**

### Rationale

Prostitution and sexual exploitation remain as one of the major problems in the Philippines. Despite being illegal with various laws passed to address the problem such as Republic Act No. 1036 which expands on Republic Act No. 9208 to address human trafficking and sexual exploitation and the Article 202 of the Revised Penal Code that prohibits prostitution, prostitution maintains a strong presence in the Philippines.

In 1993-1994, about 100,000 to 600,000 women were engaged in prostitution (International Labor Organization, 1998). In 2007, reports show that about 375,000 women are involved in prostitution mostly between 15-20 years old, but there are some instances where some start by age of 11(CBC News). By 2013, the number of sex workers in Philippines rises to about 500,000 (Dumlao). Moreover, the pandemic and the demand for electronic gadgets to attend online classes resulted in reports of students selling nude photos online as a means to purchase laptops and phones as well as for mobile data for internet (Hernando-Malipot, 2020).

### Significance of the Study

While there are government attempts to combat prostitution, the numbers which shows the growing involvement in prostitution seems to prove that currently implemented laws remain ineffective in addressing the issue. The persistence of prostitution reveals that there is a need for a new approach on how to address prostitution in the Philippine society.

While actions against prostitution lie heavily on the government, the local governments in the Philippines play a significant role in the sex industry in the country. Instead of cracking down on the local sex industry, certain local government units in the Philippines turn a blind eye or even worse, protect prostitution dens. This is because prostitution creates revenues for the local government, especially from tourist destinations and military bases. A study in 2007 reveals that the sex industry in the Philippines is the fourth largest source of the gross national product (GNP) (Protection Project). Prostitution is treated by the local governments as a business rather than a criminal act.

In Olongapo, the “regulation” of prostitution wherein prostitution is banned and licenses are only given to “KTV bars” and “entertainers” allows the normalization of prostitution as a business. These establishments dodge the regulations and the laws through subverting the technicalities of the terms in the

law while the same practice remains because the sex industry creates a large revenue for the city.

One can argue that the “businessification” of prostitution in Olongapo benefits the sex workers. Even though it is illegal, women still receive some right. First, there is a strict implementation of the tests for sexually transmitted diseases (STD) especially in 2005 when Ordinance No. 37 of 2005 was implemented. Aside from this, women are given a sanitary notebook containing their personal information and their rights, including the right to choose an establishment and the right to leave an establishment (Bulawan, 2017). However, the “businessification” of prostitution does not solve prostitution. While it creates a friendlier condition for the women, it ignores poverty and gender inequality as part of the problem, businessification of prostitution runs the risk of justifying the exploitation of women because of the revenue that it produces for the locality.

This paper aims to argue that the solution for prostitution is not to make it a business but to address poverty and gender inequality which makes prostitution possible and “acceptable.” While the implementation of safer working condition and the decriminalization of prostitution helps in securing the safety of the sex workers, a better solution for prostitution, especially to workers who feel that they are “forced” to prostitution in order to meet daily needs is to address the social problems that drive them into this industry.

### Scopes and Limitations

This paper will focus its discussion on prostitution and sexual trafficking in Olongapo. Moreover, the paper will focus on the pre-pandemic state of prostitution in Olongapo. The paper will also focus its discussion on the social analysis of the reality of prostitution in Olongapo and offer an alternative approach to how policymakers should address the issue.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The paper follows Donna Maeda’s empowerment model as the basis for addressing prostitution (Maeda,

2011). Following this model, the discourse on prostitution escapes the binary of the abolitionist versus decriminalization debate which suffers from a problematic representation of women’s experience in prostitution.

While both sides could agree on certain points such as the condemnation of criminal sanctions against women who offer sex in exchange for money, the necessity of authentic consent for legitimate sex and the reality of failure to address the economic coercion and sexual violence against sex workers (Newman, White and Findlay, 2012), the framing of the abolitionist vs decriminalization debate misses a bigger picture in addressing prostitution. The problem with the abolitionist vs decriminalization perspective in prostitution is that both sides reduce the issue of prostitution to a debate, removing it from other social realities that affect the issue. What happens is that the discussion of prostitution is reduced to an issue of agency and choice.

In order to properly represent the experiences of women, Maeda (2011) argues to go beyond the Western liberal understanding of agency. Instead of looking at prostitution as a simple issue of agency and choice, it is important to adapt a more holistic and comprehensive approach on prostitution and sexual trafficking through seeing it as an amalgamation of various social issues. Concretely speaking, this equates to improving the quality of life of women through various forms of empowerment such as education, providing an alternative line of work, and addressing the cultural issues of gender inequality.

### **Methodology**

The paper adopts a philosophical and phenomenological analysis of the issue. In order to understand the situation of the sex workers in Olongapo city, the researcher immersed himself in the realities of sex workers and sex industry in Olongapo through observations and, at the same time, partnership with BUKLOD, a group formed by former sex workers in Olongapo which aims to help current sex workers find alternative means of living.

The researcher then interpreted and analyzed the practice of prostitution and the realities of inequality that the women of Olongapo experience. These realities were placed under the ongoing feminist debate on prostitution. On the one hand, we have the

abolitionist perspective that argues that prostitution must completely be eradicated in society while on the other hand, we have the decriminalization perspective which argues for a safer and more secure workplace for sex workers. Finally, the paper will argue on the empowerment model that focuses on the complexities of prostitution and the need for social empowerment of women to address gender inequality and poverty.

## Body/Findings

### A Historical Perspective on Poverty, Gender Inequality and Prostitution in Olongapo City

To fully understand the complexity of the issue of prostitution in Olongapo City, let us look first at the historical accounts of how prostitution started and flourished in Olongapo. A brief historical review of prostitution could give us a better understanding of the multiplicities of the intersection of various issues that revolves around the prostitution in Olongapo.

The creation of military bases greatly contributes to the spread of prostitution in Olongapo. After World War II, the United States started building and certain military bases in the Philippines to expand its sphere of influence. In addition, these military bases served certain strategic value for the United States as a way to maintain influence in Asia-Pacific. It also helps the American supply lines during the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

The development of Olongapo City mimics the development of *Kijich'on* or *camp towns* in South Korea wherein the economy of the country is tied to the needs of the military bases (See, 2015). The high revenue which is obtained from offering services to the military personnel attracts the local community to dedicate their economy to the US military bases.

Thus, the economy shifts from the agricultural setup to a service-based economy, resulting in the creation of establishments that cater to American soldiers' needs, including rest and recreation (R&R) centers that offer sexual services. This means that the US military's entry not only increased the population of males in Olongapo, the military bases also bring with it the

demand for sexual services. As a matter of fact, 9000 registered hostesses and 8000 unregistered ones are servicing 8000 sailors daily with an annual spending power of 29,000,000 US dollars in Subic Bay by 1979 alone (Moselina, 1979).

Moreover, the military bases also bring the culture of a militarized masculinity in the Philippines (Ralston and Keeble, 2009). The international relationship between the Philippines and the United States is solidified through the private relationships between the citizens of these countries. This includes the relationship between the sex workers in the Philippines and the soldiers of the United States (Ralston and Keeble, 2009).

The strong relationship between the two countries was established at the expense of the women. This relation between the soldiers and the prostitute is rooted in the necessity of affirming the masculinity of the soldiers through sexualized rest and recreation before fighting for one's country (Ralston and Keeble, 2009). At this point, it is important to remember that the US soldiers are fighting in the Vietnam War. The soldiers are more likely to engage in sexualized rest and recreation as a preparation to fight and at the same time, the desire to enjoy life before entering the uncertainty of the war.

However, a militarized masculinity alone will not be sufficient to account for the sudden growth in prostitution. Looking at the data, from the 20 R&R centers in the entire Philippines in 1950's, it increases to 600 in the mid-1960's and up to 1,200 in 1990 (See, 2015). In Olongapo City, by mid-1960's there are about 20,000 women who are in the sex industry (See, 2015).

The sudden increase is due to the presence of the masculinized military and the pervasiveness of poverty in Olongapo. The women of Olongapo enter prostitution because of poverty and the lack of other possible means of income. Because of the shift from the agricultural to the service-based economy, the women's choice for income becomes limited. Among these choices of service-based work is prostitution, which has a very fast cash turn-out, which only

requires the women the skill to speak in English (See, 2015).

The demand for the US soldiers and the supply being given by the women of Olongapo creates a stable market for sex industry which will later evolve to sex tourism through the participation of the local government. Prostitution shows us that the presence of power relations between man and woman goes beyond the bedroom. Prostitution in Olongapo shows how the domination of man to woman as a way of affirming male sexuality enters the political machinations of the Philippine society.

American influence was reduced in 1991 after the Philippine Senate rejected the extension of the basing agreement between US and the Philippines with a 12-11 vote (Wallace, 1991). However, after a Chinese attempt to claim areas within the Spratly Islands, the Philippines signed the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States to establish the rules of deployment of American forces here in the Philippines. In 2014, the treaty was supplemented by the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) to strengthen the ties with US in the face of the series of Chinese attempts to claim the Spratly Islands. These military agreements further strengthen the American presence in Olongapo and create an influx of male population in the city. As a result, this further strengthens the sexual industry in Olongapo City.

At this point, it is clear that the prostitution in Olongapo reveals how different societal issues overlap. While it can be said that the problem of prostitution involves gender inequality, it also includes the poverty, exploitations in capitalism, and post-colonial relationships. Prostitution in Olongapo is not a problem of a single societal issue but is the product of the synthesis of various social issues.

#### Limits of the Abolitionist Approach

With the growing sex industry in the Olongapo, the revenue that it creates for the city and the historical shift from having an agricultural economy to a service-

based economy, prostitution becomes central to the culture and identity of the city. The everyday practice of prostitution along with how it 'solves' the economic problem of the people leads to the normalization of prostitution as a form of work in the city despite the prohibition of the national law on prostitution and other forms of sexual work.

The national government promotes an abolitionist approach to prostitution. This could be seen in the laws passed down by the government to crackdown on prostitution. The abolitionist approach promotes that prostitution, in any form, should be stopped or abolished. In addition, they also reject any form of harm reduction approach in the sex industry as they see prostitution as an illegal practice. One problem with this approach in the Philippines is that it gets mixed up with the culture of gender inequality in the Philippines, and as such, sexual workers, who are usually seen as the victim, become criminalized because of engaging in a criminal act.

Despite the abolitionist approach of the government, failure in the implementation of the law combined with the failure to address the social problems that plague the women of Olongapo resulted in the normalization of prostitution in the city. While the population believes that prostitution is wrong – which sometimes leads to the discrimination of the sex workers in their community – the local government relaxes its crackdown on sex dens because of its revenues. In addition, the general population has been desensitized by the inherent gender inequality in the practice because prostitution has become an integral part of the city's culture.

However, despite the normalization of prostitution, the sex workers face discrimination in different forms, such as ostracization. Besides, whenever the local government would conduct raids, the sex workers are seen as criminals rather than victims. There have been cases where it is the sex workers that are fined or imprisoned by the local government over the customers. Moreover, sex workers are placed at great risk in terms of sexual violence and rape as the local

government downplays such instances by interpreting participation in the sex industry as equivalent to unlimited sexual consent.

The tests that the sex workers must undergo to prove that they do not carry sexually transmitted diseases are shouldered by the workers themselves and the industry being illegal means that the workers are not eligible for health insurance and other forms of social security services.

### Limits of the Decriminalization Approach

With this failure of the abolitionist approach in Olongapo, let us now look at the decriminalization approach. The decriminalization approach argues that sexual work should be decriminalized. Moreover, this side also lobbies for the protection and safety of sexual work. This side sees sexual work on the same level as the sale of other forms of services and, as such, should not be looked down upon by society. To them, sexual work is empowering for women and as such, should be supported instead of being criminalized.

At this point, it is important to look on how the problem of prostitution is being addressed. One position is based on Allison Murray's approach to creating safer conditions for the sex industry. Donna Maeda explains that for Murray, "rather than focusing on "protection" that results in the repression of embodied labor, she advocates the creation of safer working conditions and the eradication of the inequalities and discriminations that lead to the harmful forms of sex work (Maeda, 2011)."

Murray (1998) believes that the abolitionists' position makes the image of the sex industry immoral, resulting in the criminalization of prostitutes. In the Philippines, this is reflected in the Article 202 of the Revised Penal Code which penalizes the prostitutes and the vagrants instead of the third parties, which coerce women into prostitution. Moreover, Murray (1998) believes that prostitution can be a legal job like other occupations given a better workplace and the protection of rights of the workers. Instead of criminalizing prostitution

which Murray holds as "the moral hypocrisy of global capitalism and sexual repression (Maeda, 2011)," society should legalize it and at the same time, pass laws which would protect the rights of the workers and promote a more humane condition for sexual industry. The repression of the sexual industry is the main cause of why exploitation happens in it. By legalizing it, Murray holds that the exploitation can be prevented through the enactment of laws that are favorable to the sexual worker (Maeda, 2011).

While Murray's argument is successful in pointing out that the criminalization of the sex workers is problematic and in certain cases, unjust, Murray's position tends to ignore the fact that while the women choose to enter prostitution, the choice comes from a very limited option. Going back to the earlier point on poverty in Olongapo, despite the demand from the militarized sexuality, it will never account for the spread of prostitution in the Philippines. Instead, poverty becomes essential in the spread of prostitution because it makes women more vulnerable to the exploitation of men.

Because women are denied the capacity to realize their capability and participate in society fully, they have to undergo the exploitation of society to survive. Stories from the women of BUKLOD Olongapo would affirm that given a better choice, they would never enter prostitution in the first place. Their involvement in the sex industry since they simply have to survive.

Moving beyond the discourse on the authenticity of choice, decriminalization of sex industry only makes sense when other dimensions of societal problems that affects the empowerment of women is addressed. In fact, the limitations of the decriminalization approach – as well as the abolitionist approach – points us to the direction of changing the discourse of prostitution from a purely legal issue defined by agency. Instead of this, we are demanded to understand and analyze prostitution as a social issue which is interconnected with other social issues. As such, we need to frame the discourse of prostitution not just as a legal issue but also a social, economical and a political one.

Solving Prostitution by Addressing Poverty and Gender Inequality

Ratna Kapur's notion of the sexual subaltern (2000) captures the perspective of how the members of BUKLOD Olongapo should see themselves. The sexual subaltern is composed of gays, lesbians, and sex workers whose presence and sexual activities challenge the traditional understanding and cultural norms of sex (Kapur, 200).

For Kapur (2000), the agent, in the act of prostitution, can cross between two worlds – the world of the agent and the world of the customer. This capacity of the agent allows her to challenge and question the perspective of the customer. The consent to prostitution does not happen as the consent of the free agent but as a partial consent, which is restricted by various social conditions and political arrangements (Maeda, 2011). Through this perspective, we can better understand how the women in the sex industry would look at themselves and their participation in it through this perspective.

Kapur's analysis also allows us to see the condition of the agent as non-ideal. Because consent in the sex industry is not free consent, we can see how certain conditions restrict the agent's capacity to realize herself fully. Because she has been disempowered, the agent can only achieve certain tasks which fall within her limited capacity. Given this, we should address prostitution beyond the agency-victimhood narrative and focus on conditions that prevents the subaltern agent from fully realizing their own capacity. This is because despite creating a safer space for sexual industry, it will never dissolve the stigma against it and, at the same time, the feeling of guilt of the women who enter prostitution. At best, legalizing prostitution might address the presence of gender inequality in prostitution but never fully solve other aspects of the problem.

Building from Kapur's analysis, we can look at how to solve the problem of prostitution. Going beyond the

victim-agency binary, prostitution should be addressed based on what the women who enter the situation need. Given that these women choose to enter prostitution because they are not empowered to participate in society fully, a new method of addressing prostitution should focus on giving these women the capacity to represent themselves in the social sphere. Because the problem is rooted in poverty and gender inequality, the solution must address the vulnerabilities being created by these two social issues.

We can look on how Coalition Against Trafficking in Women-Asia (CATW-Asia) and Katipunan ng Kababaihan Para sa Kalayaan (KALAYAAN) conference concluded with recommendations to UN to have a more active action against the violence against women in third world countries as well as to call for a coalition of different NGO in fighting violence against women through empowerment (Coalition Against Trafficking in Women-Asia and Katipunan ng Kababaihan Para sa Kalayaan, 1993).

The conference calls for solidarity among different NGOs and the support of different civil societies in empowering women, allowing them to represent themselves instead of relying upon others to represent them. The empowerment of women is important because it allows women to represent themselves in the social sphere. This allows for the realization of the agent's subjectivity, but it also discourages the agent from entering prostitution.

Going back to sexual inequality and poverty which are the roots of prostitution, empowerment can take place through providing support – financial, social, political, etc. – to the women. This allows for a more equal field of interaction between men and women. Also, poverty can be addressed through giving various opportunities and encouragement to women by different sectors of the society. This will allow the women to be self-sustaining and break away from the normal perception of women which is dependent.

An approach which takes into account the social condition of women allows for a more probable solution in solving prostitution. By addressing the

vulnerabilities that the women experience, society can address the problem of prostitution straight at its roots.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we looked at prostitution in Olongapo City and how the empowerment model helps us address this issue holistically. We started our discussion by looking at the historical background of prostitution in Olongapo and how various historical events shaped Olongapo into a sexual service-based economy. The existence of the American military bases gave birth to the sex industry, and the small amount of ability required to earn money forced the city to abandon its agricultural setup. In addition, the historical analysis of prostitution in Olongapo allows us to see how the issue of prostitution is a result of various social issues that manifested themselves into sex tourism and prostitution.

Next, we took a look at the abolitionist perspective of addressing prostitution in Olongapo by the national government and why this approach failed to address the problem:

1. The abolitionist approach adopted by the government fails to give justice to the sex workers of Olongapo, treating them as criminals instead of victims.
2. The abolition perspective also doubles down on the discrimination that the sex workers of Olongapo.
3. The abolitionist approach of the government further exposes the sex workers in harm as this approach excludes them from protecting the law.

While the abolitionist perspective remains lackluster in addressing prostitution, the decriminalization approach did not fair that well either. While the decriminalization approach allows for harm reduction and addresses the discrimination experienced by the social workers, it only mitigates prostitution. Decriminalization fails to address situations wherein sexual workers choose to enter the sex industry not as a form of sexual liberation and women empowerment but because they have no other alternatives to earn a living. While decriminalization allows sex work to be a legitimate choice, it does not help those who feel 'trapped' by the limited choices they have.

As such, we now turn to the empowerment model which Maeda speaks of. First, there is a demand for framing the debate on prostitution beyond the debate on legality in the empowerment model. Instead, prostitution should tackle it as a social issue among and interconnected to other forms of social issues. It also moves the discussion of agency from being free or not into the concrete agency of the sex worker as a form of restricted agency that can be improved through empowerment. The empowerment model helps the sexual workers practice authentic consent and choice by empowering them to have increased choices that they could take. This model takes prostitution beyond the level of legal discourse and elevates it into a social issue with concrete manifestations.

## Recommendations

As a preliminary study that focuses on the analysis of prostitution in Olongapo, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Formulate more concrete solutions that follow the empowerment model through coordination with the local government, the civil society, and the sex workers.
2. Create comparisons of the realities of prostitution in Olongapo with the realities or experiences of prostitution in other parts of the country or the world.
3. Give an analysis of prostitution in Olongapo that adapts to the new normal during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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