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"Social Representation of Prostitution in Gender Perspective"

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Abstract

In this work the meanings attributed to the prostitution of the women are analysed in a sample of Spanish university students, in order to explore the way in which the sexual exploitation of the body of women by men is represented. From the social emergent representation in groups of discussion a scale is designed to assess "how convincing" are the arguments. The results test the arguments that justify or question the women's prostitution. The results of this study will allow us to identify the critical arguments of the discourse and its relation with other variables.

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1. Introduction

The prostitution of the women has turned into a paradigmatic case of the complexity of meanings that operate in the conceptualization of a problem. In the debate on prostitution, there diverge first of all the discourses that give priority to the women as subjects of right in equality, opposite to which they legitimize their exploitation for serving men. In this first level, the discursive split separates those who claim the delegitimization of the patriarchy or feminists discourses, from those who defend the perpetuation of the patriarchal order for the sake of other values.

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These perspectives are formed nevertheless in a complex way, producing divisions in what we might call successive levels of discursivity, according to the readings or meanings attributed to the phenomenon of the prostitution of the women. It is in these successive levels, where the diversity of categories got in the analysis of the problem and the difference of values that influence the above mentioned meanings, such a framework of practical concretions produces a contradiction to the prostitution, that the resultant map places paradoxically in the same position as those who depart from principles and opposing values. We might say that the "labyrinth" of prostitution acquires so many branches that allows to find discourses based on equal "categorical principles" come to opposing "practical principles", and coming from opposing "categorical principles" come to equal "practical principles". This way, we can find coexisting in the same "practical" position, feminist discourses with patriarchal conservative discourses (positioned against), and feminist speeches with neo-liberal mercantilists discourses (positioned in favor). It is for this reason that a binary logic to conceptualize the positions opposing prostitution (in favor / against) is clearly insufficient.

The simplification of such a categorization not only does not clarify, but it obscures the analysis of the problem (Sendón de León, 2006). The first decision, therefore, on how to tackle prostitution and to analyze the discourses generated, passes for an adherence to the logic of the "complex thought" for which the basic postulation is the recognition that structures of great complexity can be obtained from very few elements (Morín, 1990). Hence, although it may of use – as well as inevitable - to adopt as a category of analysis the position against prostitution (pro-anti), it is necessary to include the complex framework of their cognitive representation in the minds of those who enunciate such discourses, to comprehend the diversity of active meanings under the same practical position. In the position that defends it, regulated or not, coexist feminists and patriarchal positions, in the same way that coexist in the position that advocates its abolition. This application of the principles of Aristotelian logic of "identity" and "contradiction" that sometimes we find in debates as convincing arguments (Sendón de León, 2007), not only are they useless because they do not contribute reasons, but they are harmful because they turn the discourse away from what should be its primary focus: the women in the patriarchy. We coincide therefore with the dissertations exhibited by Beatriz Gimeno (Gimeno, 2012) on the way that it would be necessary to undertake the problem to make possible a fruitful debate that, overcoming the sterile polemic on prostitution, generates useful proposals on the principal question of the analysis: the women (prostituted and not prostituted) in the patriarchy.

The theoretical frame of the social representations (Moscovici, 1979; Moscovici & Hewstone, 1986) turns out to be useful for this intention, for it allows to obtain complex configurations on the form that they acquire in the social subjects, the contents of the problem (in this case prostitution) and the relations established between them. The resultant representation is not a simple reproduction of elements of the represented object, but a complicated construction in which in addition to the proper object, the active and creative character of every individual (affected by the group to which the belong with the constrictions and legitimizations of the located social frame) has a substantial weight (Jodelet, 1986). The study of the social representations in addition to turning out to be useful in gaining access to the interpretative codes of the reality used to be placed before a problem (Ibáñez, 1988), they allow to explore the reproduction mechanisms of the domineering interests of a social system (Martín-Baró, Aron, & Corne, 1994). In fact, they emerge in situations of crisis and conflict, to answer to needs as classifying and understanding complex events, justifying actions, or differing as a group regarding others where the distinction seems to disappear (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971).

The process of objectiveness that gives place to the representation materializes in the selection and de-contextualization of the informative elements that are reorganized according to the normative proper criteria, retaining selectively those who turn out to be concordant with the adopted system of values (Jodelet, 1986). These filtered elements, shape the figurative nucleus of thought that will materialize in the discourse, condensing and simplifying the information. Finally, it loses its symbolic arbitrary character, turning it into reality, symbolized with an autonomous existence, allowing it to assimilate the figurative elements as real. The psychosocial analysis of the arguments that sub-lie to the positions adopted opposite to the prostitution constitutes therefore a material adapted to identify the process of objectivity of prostitution, in the different social speeches generated (Delgado & Gutiérrez,

2012). This way, the informative element of which prostitution constitutes at present one of the more powerful forms of criminal economy, generating substantial benefits with a clear functionality for the system (Cobo, 2011), acquires different symbolization and relevancy in the social resultant representation, depending on the adopted position. The previous ideological positions form the rational argumentation that justifies them (Billig, 1996; Travis & Aronson, 2007).

The qualitative study of the discursive positions on prostitution in young university students, by means of the skill of the group of discussion, allowed to identify the coincidence of the informative elements in the social representation of those who expressed being “in favor” (F) and those who expressed being “against” (C) (Delgado & Gutiérrez, 2014). The differences in the narrative structures identified in the mentioned study, are precisely in the meanings attributed to the elements as it shows in the following table:

Table 1. *Elements of the social representation of prostitution.*

| Position in Favor (F) | Position Against (C) |
|---|---|
| <i>F1. It is a free agreement between adult</i> | <i>C9. It is never exercised "freely"; it is done out of necessity</i> |
| <i>F2. It is a way of making a living</i> | <i>C8. There are always other ways of making a living</i> |
| <i>F3. To regulate it would generate legal income</i> | <i>C6. Negative consequences for women (no health, violence)</i> |
| <i>F4. It is a matter of ethics and individual morality</i> | <i>C5. It is not a "sexual liberation", it is a pseudo-modernity</i> |
| <i>F5. It is stigmatized because sex is a taboo</i> | <i>C7. It is a stigma for women because it is degrading</i> |
| <i>F6. It is a business transaction</i> | <i>C2. It is not a job; it objectifies the woman</i> |
| <i>F7. It fulfills a social function</i> | <i>C4. It is never ethical to sell and buy the woman's body. It needs to be eradicated</i> |
| <i>F8. To legalize it would guarantee social rights</i> | <i>C3. It exploitation, others benefit from it</i> |
| <i>F9. Prostitution is not degrading for women</i> | <i>C1. It dehumanizes the woman</i> |
| <i>F10. The right to exercise and practice it freely</i> | <i>C11. The men do not know if the women exercise it "freely" (they would conceal it out of fear)</i> |
| <i>F11. It is inevitable; it is a sexual necessity</i> | <i>C10. It is a degrading way of sexual satisfaction</i> |

In this work the following objectives show: 1) To identify what are the critical arguments that mark discriminating differences between the discourses “in favor” and “against” of the prostitution; 2) To analyze the relation between the discriminating elements and other social and ideological variables.

2. Method

2.1. Variables and Instruments

From the results of the qualitative analysis of the discourses (Delgado & Gutiérrez, 2014) a questionnaire was designed, in which the subjects had to value it using Likert scale of 5 points “how convincing” that seemed to them the arguments of each of the positions: 11 arguments in favor and 11 arguments against. The responses were ranging between 1 (very little convincing) and 5 (very convincing). The content of the questionnaire gathered the arguments exhibited in the previous table. Finally, questions of opinion were included to analyze its relation with the value attributed to each of the arguments.

2.2. Participants

The sample remained integrated by 239 Psychology students who answered voluntarily the questionnaire: 205 women (85,8%) and 34 men (14,2%) with an average age of 20,97 years ($SD = 2,98$). In religious belief 50,6% declared themselves non-believers, 40,2% not practicing believers and 9,2% practicing believers. On political ideology, left wing 38,8%, centered 44,7% and right wing 16,5%. 48,5% declare themselves progressive, 46,9% moderate and 4,6% conservatives. As for the position towards prostitution and aspects related to the equality of gender, the distribution shows in the following tables:

Table 2. *Position on prostitution and feminism*

| Position | In Favor (%) | Against (%) | Indifferent (%) |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Prostitution | 50,0% | 16,0% | 34,0% |
| Feminism | 42,4% | 25,0% | 32,4% |

Table 3. *Desired equality between men and women*

| Position | In Favor (%) |
|---|--------------|
| <i>There must be equal rights and equal roles</i> | 89,5% |
| <i>There must be equal rights but different roles</i> | 10,5% |

Table 4. *Women's desired roles*

| Position | In Favor (%) |
|--|--------------|
| <i>To work outside the home but prioritizing the home</i> | 6,7% |
| <i>To work outside and inside the home with men (the role is shared)</i> | 83,7% |
| <i>Equality and active participation in feminists groups</i> | 9,6% |

2.3. Results

For the first objective a discriminant analysis was carried, using prostitution as a dependent variable and the punctuations established for the arguments “in favor” and “against” as predictors. There were 2 canonical significant functions obtained ($p < 0,05$), agglutinating the first discriminant function 84,7% of explained variance and the second function 12,6%. As shown in the following graph, it is the first function the one that allows differentiating those “in favor” from those “against” the prostitution:

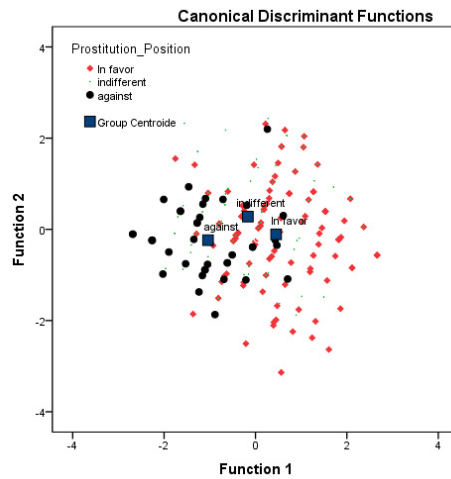


Figure 1. Canonical Discriminant Functions

There were four arguments proved that discriminating between those “in favor” from those “against” prostitution: three arguments in favor and one against, which weighed in the discriminant function 1 that allows to differentiate between both discourses, shown in the following table:

Table 5. Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients

| Arguments | Function 1 | Function 2 |
|--|------------|------------|
| <i>F7_Prostitution fulfills a social function; allows for people to have relations, who in other circumstances would be able to.</i> | 0,293 | -0,62 |
| <i>F3_Maintain and legalizing prostitution would provide the country.</i> | 0,254 | 0,90 |
| <i>F9_Prostitution isn't degrading for the women who practice it, if she herself has willingly chosen to do so, no one should judge her.</i> | 0,423 | -0,14 |
| <i>C4_To legalize prostitution would imply legitimizing it ethically, since people find what's legal as correct. The right thing to do should be to end prostitution, not for people to accept it.</i> | -0,367 | 0,26 |

The argument that discriminates the most between the discourses is the F9 (0,423), followed by the C4 (-0,367), followed by lower weight by F7 (0,293) and F3 (0,254). It is therefore, the difference in the importance granted to these four arguments, which marks the differences in the opposite discourses. Those who position themselves “in favor” of prostitution grant a greater weight to arguments F9, F7 and F3. On the contrary, argument C4 has a greater weight to those who position themselves “against”.

For objective 2, MANOVA was applied taking as dependent variables the punctuations granted to the conviction of four arguments that proved discriminating and as independent variables the gender, the position on feminism and the political ideology. The ideology did not show significant effects. The principal effects that turned out to be significant ($p < 0,001$) were:

- Gender: they turned out to be more convincing for men than for women, arguments F7 (fulfills a social function) and F3 (economic benefits to the country).
- Feminism: only differences were obtained in argument F7 (fulfills a social function), that turned out to be more convincing for whom positioned favorably towards feminism than those who had an unfavorable opinion.

Effects of interaction were obtained between gender and ideology ($p \leq 0,05$) for arguments F9 (a personal decision, not a degrading one) and C4 (to legalize it would be to legitimize it), as shown in figure 2.

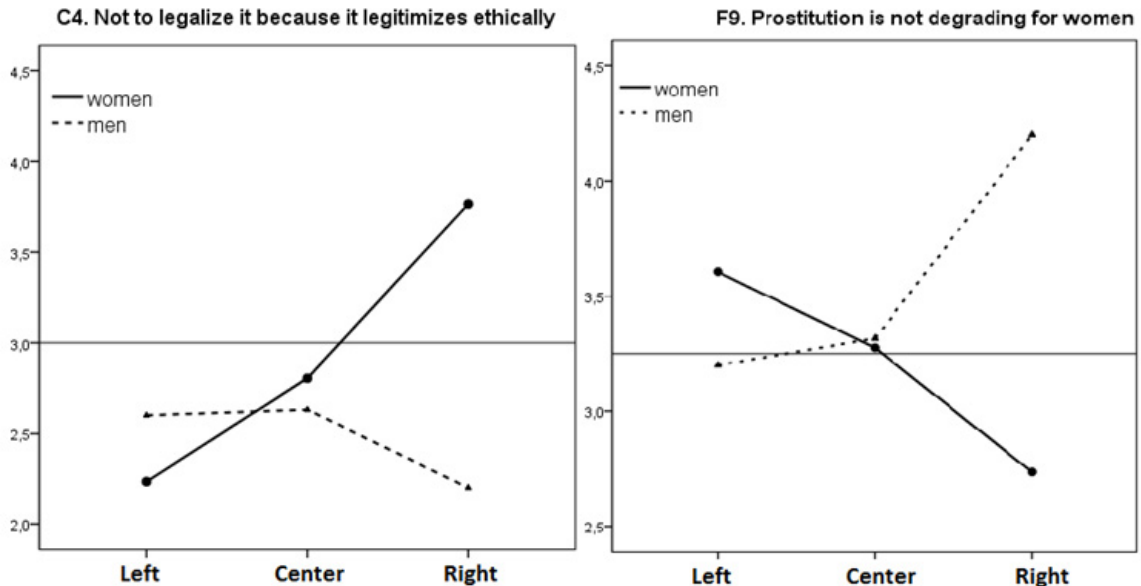


Figure 2. Gender * Ideology Interaction

The biggest difference takes is produced between whom they declare themselves of right wing, being more convincing for women than for men the argument in favor (F9: *it is not degrading for women; it is a personal decision*), and more convincing for men than for the women the argument against (C4: *not to legalize it because it legitimizes ethically*).

Amongst those who declare themselves left wing the relation is inverted: the argument is more convincing for women than for men in favor (F9); and the argument is more convincing for men than for women against (C4). A fact to bear in mind in addition to these differences, is that - as it is observed in the figure 2-, major power of conviction is granted to argument F9 (convincing: mean > 3), than argument C4 against (not convincing: mean < 3).

3. Conclusions

Firstly the obtained results confirm the complex framework of the meanings attributed in the representation of prostitution. The analysis of the content of four discriminating arguments between the discourses, reveals that the differentiation is marked mainly by the argument that attributes the exercise of the prostitution to an election conducted freely by women, depriving the judgment of authority over this question since it would be equivalent to questioning the freedom of decision-making (F9). The value attributed to this argument marks the greatest differences, followed by the opposite argument that advocates for its disappearance questioning the legitimating effect caused by its legalization (C4), following in discriminating capacity the favorable arguments that allude to the social function that provides sex to those who do not have any other way of obtaining it (F7), and the economic benefits that would be obtained if regulated (F3). Although these arguments discriminate between the positions “in favor” and “against” the prostitution, the women grant less validity than men, to the arguments of the *social function that provides sexual satisfaction to men* (F7) and of the *economic benefits that it would bring if legalized* (F3). It seems reasonable to explain this difference according to what we might call “intuition of gender”, which it would

allow the women to admit and to push away this recognition that makes them object to the service of the male sexuality, or it turns them into financial assets to improve the economy of the country.

On the other hand, the analysis reveals an ingenuously idealized representation of prostitution, emphasized a consideration as a free election of the women who exercise it while neglected to the sociological data of alienation and the criminal economy organized around her. The representative biased of this idealized vision would explain the interactions with the political ideology, of those who declare themselves of left wing give more value to this argument (F9) than to the opposing argument who advocates for its disappearance being against its legalization (C4). If the debate regarding prostitution activates a biased and simplistic representation in which it positions itself about the freedom of election the ideological auto-definition (left wing) it will facilitate the adhesion to the favorable position connoted as “freedom”, by not activating other considerations so crucial as the alienation, development, harmful effects to the health and the social life of the women who exercise it, or the patriarchal model of sexuality that sub-lies in it. More over this effect is amplified in women than in the men, as shown in the interaction graphs, revealing on the one hand that men and women are concerned in different ways by these arguments and that for women the representation of prostitution as a matter of freedom is more substantial.

The argument against those that discriminate between those who position themselves differently (C4), question the ethical endorsement that would entail legalizing a practice that should disappear. The interaction between political ideology and gender regarding this argument is shown in the previous figure. Amongst those who declare themselves of left wing, women validate less the ethical question for its legalization. To those who declare themselves of right wing, the differences between women and men are amplified by the relation invested: men validate more the argument in favor and women the argument in against. This result suggests a greater weight of the ideology to those who position themselves in the left wing (minor differences between men and women), and a greater weight of what we have called the “intuition of gender” amongst those who position themselves in the right wing (major differences between women and men).

Others two favorable arguments that prove discriminating are anchored in easily recognizable values as androcentric and patriarchal. The “*social function that fulfills the prostitution providing sex to men who might not obtain it otherwise*” (F7), reflects the naturalization of the subordination of the women is considered to be a legitimized masculine need. The focus is placed on men who cannot obtain sex otherwise, not on women who prostitute themselves to satisfy needs, subordinating herself to the “male rights” to obtain sexual satisfaction. The same naturalization of the subordination can be identified as a consideration of women as financial assets which sub-lies in the argument that claims “*the economic benefits that it would bring to the country, should they contribute in taxes*”.

The studies of the cognitive psychology have showed that the availability of a mental image helps to explain that matters they are very present in the mind of the people, whereas others fall into oblivion. This availability or simplification of an associate image, in this case the prostitution, “*acts as a factor of probability ignoring statistical information*” (Kahneman, 2014, p. 21). The heuristic availability (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981) acts as a bias in the reasoning, having activated mental images associated with an object, explaining why attention is paid to some elements and not to others. This would help explain the way in which the cognitive representation of the object, anchored in an ideological and social position, acts by giving relevance to a few elements and neglecting others. Hence the importance of generating images of the prostitution that give heuristic accessibility to the elements neglected in the imaginary social, visualizing the readings of gender on the use of the body of the women that are involved in the phenomenon of prostitution and the development of her alienation. The ratification of the elements of the discourse pro-prostitution in women who define themselves in left wing ideological position as shown by the information, suggests the need to study more thoroughly in which way these elements anchored in its representation (*freedom of decision of the women and ethical endorsement of the legalization*), are meant. In conclusion, the labyrinthine framework of the representation of prostitution, calls for investigations that allow unraveling the way in

which the ideological use of the body of the woman is made compatible with the social conditions the feminine prostitution is exercised, and the idealized vision of it as an act of freedom.

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