



When Women Have to Sell their Bodies: Migrant Workers in Abidjan

André Jacques

The road from the former colonial town of Gran Bassam, now ruined, passes through magnificent plantations of palm trees, and as you enter Abidjan you can admire the stately avenues and modern lay-out of the 'Plateau' district. But, if you let your curiosity lead you further, beyond the Hotel Ivoire, which is said to consume by itself as much electricity as the whole of Upper Volta, if you venture as far as Koumassi, then you will discover the other side of the picture: there 250,000 people are rotting in the squalour of an immense shanty town.



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Abidjan began its meteoric progress in 1950 and is today Africa's sixth largest port. In 1955, with a population of 125,000, prostitution was already so well established that it became the object of an enquiry by the French ethnologist and film-maker Jean Rouch and Edouard Bernus of the French Institute of Black Africa.

Thus from the beginning prostitution has been there as the other side of the picture. The providing of physical pleasures has gone with a form of exploitation which is particularly dangerous for thousands of women, most of them foreign, who failing any alternative have been drawn into the 'profession' .



An inquiry ascertained that there were five categories of prostitutes :

- ★ *Dioulas*, who were often marketwomen,
- ★ *Nigerians* living as courtesans,
- ★ young *Ivory Coast* women, who asked for gifts rather than money for their services, and were living under the authority of an older woman,
- ★ *professionals*, frequenting bars and night spots,
- ★ and finally, the most important category, made up of *Ghanaians* and *Nigerians*, the so called '*Toutous*'.

Those belonging to this category occupy whole streets and work on their account. Eighty-five percent of them are between 20 and 40 years old and three quarters of them are married. Most of them have children. Obligated to sell their bodies in order to survive, they attempt to organize themselves together so as to be able to keep up some their social dignity.

They declare that they are doing a real, special and dangerous job, and they are often doing it to pay off a family debt, or to keep their family or to be able to return home after some time with some savings. Their president puts it like this: 'We have left our native land and come to the Ivory Coast in search of money. The work we do is tough and demanding....' - hence their determination to keep prices high so as to make it worth their while to run the risks involved.

In 1971 a further inquiry drew attention to the fact that the number of women from the Ivory Coast was increasing.

If we examine the results of these inquiries more closely, two facts attract our attention :

★ 41.9 % of the prostitutes from outside the Ivory Coast are Protestant in origin. (38.1% are Catholic in origin.)

★ They have a clear objective, after having achieved it, they intend to give up their work and return home :

- 36 % — to acquire a business
- 13 % - to buy a sewing machine
- 9 % - to get married.

We can thus see that more than half of them genuinely intend to return home. But - and in this respect their lot is the same as that of innumerable migrant workers - 43 % of them do not manage to save. Those who do make money out of their being there are the landlords of the premises they use. Another indication of the risks that they are exposed to is the spectacular increase in venereal disease. In 1977 32,000 cases were noted (cf. Claudine Vidal, *Guerre des Sexes à Abidjan*, in *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, No. 65).

Source: Translated from the French by the Language Service, World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland.