

# Prostitution in Benin, Benin (West-Africa).

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## Introduction

Just like in most western countries Benin outlawed prostitution 1), and prosecutors can expect penalties by paying money or going to jail 2) Although prostitution is not general accepted in society 2), it exists for different reasons and under different circumstances. The majority of prostitutes are female, but there's also a market for homosexuals in Benin, thus Men Having Sex with Men (MSM). However in this paper we will only discuss the female prostitution because MSM is highly stigmatised and although the author knows some areas where young boys are working in this sector, there're hardly official records available. By indirect glance we will touch the problems of Vidomegon and child traffic and the practises of sex for economic reasons in rural area in the north of Benin. It is important to realise that although the law prescribes punishment for sex trades, victims forced into prostitution or victims of any delict concerning sexual violence or harassment, are seldom willing to go to the police because procedures are often declared invalided and victims want to stay anonymous for many reasons 2) including retaliation.

## Methods and findings

Information was obtained by published literature and institutional reports. It has to be noticed that only a small number of (scientific) papers are published about facts and features of prostitution in Benin and they describe mostly the situation in Cotonou, the economic capital of Benin.

## Cotonou

Like in other countries, a lot of women working in the sex industry are from abroad. In the Netherlands for example, where exploitation and pimping are illegal but prostitution is legalised, more than 80% of the commercial sex workers (CSWs) come from foreign countries 3). In Benin that is not different. There are pimps and gangs and approximately 15 % of the CSWs are born in Benin and the others come from surrounding countries, mostly Nigeria, Togo and Ghana 4). The workplaces are often the street, bars, restaurants and hotels, sometimes sex-houses.

Many CSWs are hoping to find money more easily, to continue their education, support their family, trying to survive in a foreign country or other economic reasons. There are young girls in Cotonou learning English in order to start as CSW in the neighbor country Nigeria, known as a country with a thriving sex industry 5). Another part of the CSWs left their home region because of instability in their country or violation by their husband or boyfriend. Foreigners come to do their work anonymous and intentionally only for a certain period of time. A lot of women working as CSW do have a (marital) relation and don't want their men to know. This means they can't use a condom in their relation in order to prove their trustworthiness. In interviews they all say they persist on using condoms but in the STD clinic the medical staff finds otherwise. In the Centre d'Etudes, de Recherches et d'Interventions pour le Development (CERID), an organization that provides sex workers with free medical treatment and counselling, there're findings of 30-40% of the CSWs testing HIV-positive 6).

## Condom use among CSWs and their clients in Cotonou

In a survey between April 1996 and December 1999, 1,152 CSWs were followed in an STD clinic in Cotonou and 2,957 STD episodes were diagnosed during that period. When CSWs started consisting on condom use, this increased from 6% in 1996-97 to 35% in 1998 and 67% in 1999 4).

It is known that men "on the road" like e.g. soldiers and truck drivers are more at risk because they often have girlfriends in several towns and are usual also customers for CSWs. Several (inter)national NGOs are trying, in cooperation with (local) government, to sensitize the population at schools, in clinics and communities in general, but in specific those men at risk and their providers, to use condoms in order to protect them against the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and other Sexual Transmittable Diseases (STDs).

Through a research in Cotonou in the year 2000 among clients of CSWs, there were 402 men questioned about their socio-demographic situation and condom use. The findings were very interesting, then 66.7% of the male visitors were of Beninese origin and 80% had a wife or fixed relationship, the majority was young. The median age 25.5 (range 17-53) years. Information of the men questioned learned that 56% had used a condom in this particular case and 54% uses a condom always or often with commercial sex workers. The use of condoms was most frequent by men who were higher educated or had to pay a higher price for the sexual services. So condom use was not related to age, marital or conjugal status, length or frequency of the visits. Also there was a big variation in condom use according to the location of the prostitution site in Cotonou. In the contrary to some other countries, offering more money in order to not use a condom is uncommon in this research 6).

### **Vidomegon and child traffic**

Although official forbidden by law, Benin is a country where child traffic is common and e.g. Vidomegon is socially accepted. (*Vidomegon means abuse of young children, often girls, from poor families which are sent to work as domestics in exchange for housing and food and risking sexual harassment and domestic violence*). Child labour and sexual exploitation are the most common reasons for child traffic and concerning this problem Benin is one of the most problematic states of West-Africa, where children out of Benin – sometimes already trafficked into Benin from other countries, are mostly sold to Gabon, Ivory coast and Nigeria and vice versa 8,9). Many children are sold or given by (one of) their parents, especially with vidomegon, when kids are sent to relatives in better economic positions. It is expectable a part of those children will end up in prostitution, both in rural as urban area and even abroad in Western countries.

### **Prostitution in rural area and in the region of Boukombé**

In rural area women are not walking up and down the road to seek customers, neither you can find sex clubs. But that doesn't mean there's no prostitution. The practises are more hidden but still visible and known by the community. The different is only sex for money is seen as prostitution. For example those girls working in bars, giving sexual services for money are called prostitutes. 'Unprotected' widows – without male protection from their family - receiving men on regularly base in order to find food and school money for their children, are not seen as sex workers. According to the cultural and social tradition they are contributing to the preservation of the name of the family and thus delivering 'services'. Children born out of those 'services' are named after the father who is dead. They are born in his spirit and it is a normal situation a widow has up to 5 children or more after the death of her husband, who are all fathered by local men. The same practise is expected from women who are the only child of the parents. She can't marry but stays the rest of her life in the elderly house to continue the name of the family. Talking to those women they will tell you they preferred to be economic independent or marrying a male relative, which is not possible, because all men of the family are dead. But even at moments when they are taken against their will, they will not go to the police because they themselves accept it as their fate, as part of their culture.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that CSWs are not accepted in the social culture of Benin, but unlike this stigmatizing behavior, just as in all parts of the world, they have clients on daily base. The main reason for women to become CSWs are economic ones but even if women choose for themselves, men still are influencing and dominating women in their decision to have safe sex.

In bigger cities as Cotonou, Porto Novo and Parakou, CSWs will be more recognizable by the way they search their clients, although they want to be anonymous for family and friends, often living far away. It is to expect that the working conditions in bars and restaurants will be more or less the same in rural and urban area. The 'unprotected' widows will be treated different, more acceptance by the community, but this will be depending on the culture and society in that particular region.

Nevertheless there is too little known about prostitution in Benin and research in different sub-areas would be recommended.

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