

Visions from the Margins: Recentering Sex Work in Colonial Mexico
Tinker Grant Research Report

Frederick Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, argues that prostitution is the result of the monogamous family structure. The patriarchal family structure is based on the supremacy of the man and whose purpose is to ensure that there is undisputed paternity, which causes total control over female sexuality¹. With the introduction of the monogamous family, women were expected to practice monogamy, which did not apply to men. Therefore, it was necessary to have a group of women outside of marriage with whom men could continue to have access to multiple sources to satisfy their sexual desires. Since this occidental patriarchal family model was imposed in the Americas with the arrival of the Spaniards, it also had an impact on the way that prostitution developed.

When I proposed this project, I initially sought to explore how concerns about race and religion shaped prostitution during Mexico's colonial period as well as the agency and daily lives of these sex workers. I wanted to learn about the involvement of the church in prostitution as well the role of the state in controlling this institution. I also wanted to learn about recogimientos and how they transitioned from being a space that was supposed to keep women safe to a place of punishment. However, once I visited the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), the Archivo Histórico del Colegio de las Vizcaínas, and the Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México, I started discovering the complexities of prostitution in New Spain. When looking at the catalogs of the different archives, I realized that there were no documents with the specific regulations regarding prostitution, instead I found many files with separate cases that in the beginning did not seem to have any relations to one another. From previous research, I knew that before the mid 17th century, prostitution had been tolerated by the church and allowed to a certain degree by the state. Therefore, I had anticipated facing some troubles when looking for material from this age. Nevertheless, I knew that being an "alcahuete" (pimp) was considered a crime, which gave me access to a couple of very interesting files. One of the biggest challenges that I faced while navigating the archive was the limitations of vocabulary. It did not take long for me to realize that terms such as "prostituta" and "prostitución" were not in use in New Spain until the end of the 18th century. This left me with a big gap that I could only partially fulfill when looking at other terms that I was able to find in textbooks and other files. Despite the many difficulties that I encountered, I was able to expand my knowledge and get a clear understanding on how prostitution developed in New Spain.

Among the documents I found was the case of Don Juan Domingo Gonsales, who in 1799 wanted to prevent the marriage between his son Joseph Ambrosio and Gregoria Martinez, an indigenous woman². According to Juan Domingo Gonsales, Gregoria was a prostitute who was

¹ Engels, Friedrich. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. London: Electric Book Co., 2001. Print.

² AGN/Indiferente Virreinal/Caja 2334/7413/5/Exp 5

unworthy of marrying his son. It was also mentioned that Gregoria and Joseph had been living together and had a child together. This did not seem to make a difference for Juan Domingo who threatened to enlist him in the army and send him into exile if he persisted in his wish to marry Gregoria. On the other hand, Gregoria demanded that Joseph keep his word of marriage. The case did not take too long to resolve since Gregoria decided to desist on the promise of marriage that had been given to her by Joseph. There were other similar cases in which women demanded that their promises of marriage be kept, but that family members of the male side interfered, arguing that these women were prostitutes. Not surprisingly, in most of these cases those accused of being prostitutes were women of color. These cases show how the legal system was used against women. On the one hand, women resorted to the legal system to enforce the marriage words given to them. On the other hand, it was also used to keep them from ascending the social ladder.

Even though there were women, such as Gregoria Martines, who despite being accused of being prostitutes were not punished by the state, there are other cases that show how they received different penalties. Such is the case of María Antonia Estrada, who in 1790 was accused of being a prostitute for a priest who assured that she was responsible for sending many souls to hell³. María Antonia was sent to a house of recogidas and received 25 lashes in public. Later, María Antonia states that her declaration was never taken and that she was an honorable woman. She relates how she was taken from her house by a man that was asking for a woman that used to live with her, the man took her, and she was sent to the house of the recogidas where they cut off her hair and was publicly punished. Another case was that of Doña Anna María Sanchez Revollo who was accused by her husband Alonzo Gavidia of being adulterous and a prostitute⁴. Alonzo accused his wife of being a lover of José Antonio Calderón and sent information to the bishop who sent Anna María to a recogimiento. Later on, it was demonstrated that Anna María was innocent, José Antonio was set free while she remained in the recogimiento. In an age where women's well-being depended on the public opinion, which was based in patriarchal laws, it was of the utmost importance that women followed the rules to ensure their acceptance into society. The public punishments became a spectacle with a double intention, on the one hand they publicly denigrated the person and on the other it served as a warning to other women. Contrastingly, when women were sent to recogimientos to remain in seclusion, they were erased from society and lost any agency that they could have over their own lives. Whether women were punished in public or in private spaces, punishment served to enforce patriarchy and keep control over women's sexuality.

The files that I found in these archives about recogimientos were of significant importance. In the Archivo General de la Nación and the Archivo Histórico del Colegio de las Vizcaínas there

³ AGN/Indiferente Virreinal/Caja 1494/6573/2/Exp 002

⁴ AGN/Indiferente Virreinal/Caja 5259/10328/38/Exp 038

were documents with letters directed to the authorities asking for permission to establish recogimientos⁵⁶. According to these documents, the purpose of the institutions was to protect women from outside dangers. However, there are multiple cases that prove that this was more of a place of punishment than protection. In 1772, there was “diligencia,” or study, to analyze the living conditions in the recogimiento of Santa María Egipcíaca in Puebla⁷. Several women of the recogimiento were asked to give their statements about the living conditions and all of them complained about the treatment they were given as well as the lack of resources. Some of them even stated that the living conditions were worse than in the women's prison. At the end of this study there was a list with the names of the women that were in the recogimiento, as well as some of the accusations that resulted in them being sent to that place. For some women all that was necessary to be sent to the recogimiento was an accusation, while others were sent there for the relations, they maintained with men, others for selling tepaches, and others for prostitution.

Exploring the archives has given a better insight of how prostitution developed in New Spain. I now possess a clearer understanding of how the state and the church controlled the female body. Despite being at the margins of society, prostitutes learned how to navigate a system that continuously denigrate them and gave them very little opportunities for improving their lives. As I continue with my studies, I will continue studying how prostitutes in New Spain were more than victims, they were agents of society that had an impact in many aspects of culture and daily life.

⁵ Archivo de las Vizcaínas/013-IV-001

⁶ AGN/Instituciones Coloniales/Reales Cédulas Originales y Duplicados/Reales Cédulas Originales/Vol 74/4140/12/Exp 12

⁷ AGN/Instituciones Coloniales/Cárceles y Presidios/ Presidios y Cárceles/Vol 15/13661/2/Exp 2