

THE MORALITY AND ECONOMICS OF PROSTITUTION IN INDONESIA

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Many Indonesians hope that what has been enthusiastically promoted as “a feast of democracy” and “the first free election since 1955” will liberate the country from uncertainty and turmoil.¹ The election held last June 7, 1999 is regarded as a first step towards the “right” kind of democratic government, necessary to consolidate and hasten the process of economic and political reform. Still, even if the election succeeds in turning a pseudo-democratic country into a real and stable democracy — which is not necessarily the case — the task of rebuilding political and economic institutions will not be an easy one. As the Trade and Industry Minister George Yeo of Singapore stated: “So many forces have been unleashed, so many factors and factions are now in play, that getting Indonesia back into a normal state is a complicated process involving many twists and turns” (*International Herald Tribune*, 1999:3). A country that was once acclaimed for its achievements of decades of economic growth and stability, Indonesia nowadays desperately struggles for solutions to an unfolding financial, social and political crisis.

How could this reversal of fortune happen? In retrospect, the inception of this multilayered crisis could be traced back as early as 1996, when the chairwoman of the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (Indonesian Democratic Party), Megawati Soekarnoputri, was ousted by violent state intervention, thereby provoking an outcry of public disdain and strengthening underlying discontent with authoritarianism and mismanagement. Widespread political unrest was soon followed by other mutually reinforcing problems. Unusual droughts caused by El Niño led to an outbreak of extensive forest fires and put pressure on the supply and price of most food-grains, especially rice. On August 4, 1997, following the devaluation of the Thai Baht one month earlier, the Central Bank rescinded its control over the value of the Rupiah, provoking a sharp depreciation of the exchange rate and exposing chronic weaknesses in Indonesia’s economic fundamentals. To address these shortcomings, the government was driven to seek assistance from the International Monetary Fund

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(IMF) and other international donors, which increased the country's external debts and augmented its dependency on external aid (UN, 1998:iii; Betke and Kolb-Hindarmanto, 1998:1; UNFPA:41-71).²

In early 1998, perceived political unwillingness to address the growing problems further fostered dissatisfaction with the government's inefficiency and strengthened public demand for political change. Students took the lead in protesting against "KKN" (*Korupsi, Kolusi dan Nepotisme*: Corruption, Collusion and Nepotism) and demanding *Reformasi* (Reform). Besides being grounded in "Western-oriented" democratic and human rights values, this nationwide protest movement was strongly influenced by a revival of Islamic sentiments, defining existing malpractice as un-Islamic and symptomatic of the country's moral decadence.

The climax of this political crisis was reached in May 1998 with the eruption of mass riots in Jakarta, Solo and other cities, wherein thousands of people were killed and valuable properties destroyed. The escalation of civil violence did not spare women, especially those of Chinese origin, who became the victims of systematic and organized sexual assault and rape (Tim Relawan, 1998). In the face of mounting chaos, on May 21, President Suharto stepped down, handing over the power to Vice-President B.J. Habibie. This change in leadership, however, hardly improved the situation. Up to now, economic deterioration and political dissatisfaction persist, since the government has failed to gain political legitimacy, and has been unable to contain the collapse of the industrial sector and the rising unemployment.

As the crisis continues to evolve, assessments are underway of its short and long term impact, in an effort to gather the necessary information for the planning of effective responses. Some of the most recent studies (Frankenberg *et al.*, 1999; Chandrakirana and Zakaria, 1999) show highly differentiated patterns in the way different socioeconomic groups have been affected by current developments, and stress the importance of formulating specific research questions for different sectors of society. As a UNFPA report stated:

The effects of the crisis on the welfare of the population are nuanced and very heterogeneous; they clearly vary by region, across socioeconomic groups and across demographic groups. If policies are to succeed at mitigating the impact of the crisis, they must be based on solid information about who has been affected, how they have been affected, and how they are changing their behaviors in response to the crisis (Frankenberg *et al.*, 1999:1).

The complexity and multifarious character of the crisis also requires a multidimensional approach that links economic and political analysis into a unique con-

ceptual framework. Still, most of the studies undertaken so far have either addressed the economic impact of the crisis or they have merely focused on its political consequences, thus failing to provide a comprehensive analysis of the situation.

These considerations roused my interest to know more about the socio-economic and political impact of the crisis on one of the most “forgotten” sectors of society, i.e. the sex industry. Although prostitution plays a substantial economic role in Indonesia and, especially at the local level, largely contributes to government revenue, financial analysis of the crisis by policy makers and international bodies has largely ignored it. Neither has attention been devoted to the ways the crisis affects those who make a living out of commercial sex transactions. This paper tries to fill these gaps in the belief that it is important to discern the political and economic trends that affect prostitution and to be able to foresee and eventually mitigate some of its most injurious effects upon the health and safety of sex workers, and more broadly, of the general public.

Prostitution in the Twilight Zone

Prostitution in Indonesia, as in many other Southeast Asian countries, lacks official recognition. Still, it has a long history of prospering in the shadow of the law. An in-depth study of the sex industry by demographers Jones and Hull, and labor analyst Sulistyaningsih (1995) traces back the origins of prostitution in Indonesia to the commoditization and trade of women in the 18th century Javanese kingdoms. Similarly, the historian Koentjoro (1989) links modern-day prostitution in Java to the Sultanate of Cirebon, showing how eleven regencies,³ which were previously known to be suppliers of women to the court, still supply sex workers to the cities up to this day.

During the Dutch colonization, these feudal systems were expanded into a fully commercialized sex industry to serve the needs of the predominantly male Europeans. Concerned about the health status of the European population, in 1852, the colonial government regulated commercial sex to prevent the transmission of syphilis and other venereal diseases across ethnic borders (Sciortino, 1995:64, 85) and ensure “disease-free soldiers and coolies.” In line with the “*Reglement tot wering van de schadelijke gevolgen, welke uit prostitutie voortvloeijen*” (Regulation to counteract the damaging results of prostitution), “public women” were put under the supervision of the police, encouraged to operate in brothels, routinely subjected to medical control, and treated with a mercurial cure if found infected. In

due time, national directives were abolished and regional and municipal councils were given the authority to issue their own rules, in an effort to better control prostitution and more effectively limit the spread of venereal diseases (Hesselink, 1987:206-208; Saraswati Sunidyo, 1993:42-45).

The decentralized regulatory system continued to exist after Independence. In 1958, Presidential Decree no. 5 handed over to the provinces the tasks to “contend with *kemaksiatan* (immorality),” entrusting merely a supervisory role to the Ministry of Social Affairs (Saraswati Sunidyo, 1993:46). At the national level, no new criminal laws were issued to expressly forbid prostitution. Based on colonial jurisprudence, only persons facilitating or deriving profit from illegal sexual activities and those involved in the trading of women and minor children may be incriminated, but there were no criminal provisions for the act of commercial sex itself and for the sex workers. On the contrary, at the provincial and subdistrict levels, a variety of regulations have been chartered which prohibit or try to contain prostitution. Generally, soliciting on the streets and streetwalkers are banned, while commercial sex in brothel complexes (*lokalisasi*) or in the so-called rehabilitation centers (*Panti Rehabilisasi Wanita Tuna Susila*) is tolerated (Jones, Sulistyaningsih and Hull, 1998: 57-59).

These quasi-legalized forms of prostitution, overseen by the Ministry of Social Affairs and regulated by the Regional Executive Council or Muspida,⁴ have been established as a way to confine prostitution within a limited area and prevent disturbance to public order in the streets while protecting sex workers from possible violence by their clients. Concerned institutions also invoke public health arguments, arguing that in the *lokalisasi*, sex workers are subjected to routine medical check-ups, are given penicillin injections to keep them “free” from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs),⁵ and can participate in AIDS prevention programs. Although available research is not sufficient to compare the health risks of women in the *lokalisasi* and in other settings, there is enough anecdotal information to conclude that free-lance street workers have poorer access to medical and social services, and face greater threats of violence from customers, boyfriends, pimps and the police (Tan, 1998:7).

Strict regulations further aim at controlling the movements of sex workers and, in accordance with the criminal law, restrict this profession to adult, unmarried women. By limiting the mobility of sex workers and opening it up only to specific socio-demographic groups, the government aims at preventing the diffusion of prostitution to the entire society. What is more, concentration in specific locations is considered instrumental for the rehabilitation of prostitutes. The underlying claim is

that sex workers practice only temporarily in the *lokalisasi* until they become ready to leave the sex industry and go back to their community. To this aim, a variety of courses is provided to teach them basic skills, such as sewing and hairdressing, as well as religious and ethical values to transform them to “morally good women” (Saraswati Sunidyo, 1993:55-58; Jones, Sulistyaningsih and Hull, 1998:57-59). Although the results of such rehabilitation programs are hard to prove, their abolition has never been considered, since it serves the higher purpose of providing legitimacy to the government in its permitting prostitution. The upholding of the social and humanitarian goal of rehabilitation also conceals the fact that local government authorities, including police and military, by acting as both regulators and managers of the prostitution complexes, are able to gain substantial profit from the trade (Dhia Prekasha Yoedha, 1995:7-9).

Protection from the authorities has, in turn, allowed both official and unofficial *lokalisasi* to flourish. Although establishments in the complexes can be fairly small — many are actually houses with several rooms, each of which is rented by a sex worker — their overall dimensions are often quite impressive. The largest brothel complexes can be found in Jakarta, Surabaya and other main cities in Java. For Surabaya, it is estimated that in 1993 there were about 7,500 prostitutes operating in brothel complexes, with the largest one, Tambak Asri, having an estimated 3,500 prostitutes. In Jakarta, the 11.5 hectare complex of Kramat Tunggak has more than 300 brothels distributed in 8 RT (neighborhood units) for a total of 2,500 rooms and a population of 1,800 prostitutes (*The Jakarta Post*, 1996; Tan, 1998:6). Smaller size *lokalisasi* are spread across the archipelago, targeting all classes of men, as the following case shows:

The official brothel complex in Jayapura is called Tanjung Elmo. This name is in accordance with the *Surat Keputusan Bupati Kepala Daerah Tingkat II Jayapura*, no. 35/KPTS/BUP-JP/1978 dated 5 June 1978, which appointed Tanjung Elmo in the village of Dabohaley Jaya, subdistrict of Sentani, district of Jayapura as a resocialization and rehabilitation place for *Wanita tuna Susila* [WTS; literally “women lacking morals”]... The *lokalisasi* of Tanjung Elmo is the largest brothel complex in Irian Jaya. In the morning as well as in the evening it is full of local men from all social backgrounds. Tourists and workers from various countries also frequently use this brothel. In recent years, men from Papua New Guinea further animate this “sex fair”... The clients of Tanjung Elmo are from both lower and higher classes. Some of them work in the government, some are private employees, some are unskilled workers and some are unemployed. Parked there we can see all kinds of vehicles: private cars, official government cars, taxis, and motors. We can even find students in uniform... The total of sex workers in the brothel has been increasing. Statistics from the Subdistrict Social Affairs Office documented 361 sex workers in 1993 and 403 in 1994/95 (La Pona, 1998:12).⁶

The presence of these brothel complexes and houses, although instrumental in localizing prostitution, has not prevented other forms of commercial sex from thriving in entertainment facilities, such as hotels, karaoke lounges, discotheques, bars and massage parlors. In many cities, prostitutes also operate on the streets and in relatively isolated and dark places, such as cemeteries and municipal gardens. These various forms of prostitution make up a complex organizational structure consisting of both "organized" and "unorganized" sectors. While "organized" prostitution is characterized by defined work relationships between the manager, the intermediaries and the sex workers, in "unorganized" prostitution, the sex workers work and contact their clients on their own (Jones, Sulistyaningsih & Hull, 1995:25).

The diversification of the sex industry is also reflected in the price of the services offered. Jones, Sulistyaningsih & Hull (1995:43-46) identify four ranges of prices. In 1994, at the low-price end of the market, prices varied from Rp. 2,000 (at the time \$1), both in the organized sector outside Java and in the unorganized sector in Java, to Rp. 10,000 in the average-price brothels in main Javanese cities. In the same year, the middle class segment ranged from Rp. 30,000 in brothel complexes to Rp. 60,000/70,000 in massage parlors, while the high-class segment consisted of priced massage parlors and call-girls initially contacted in night clubs charging Rp. 100,000 to Rp. 300,000. Finally, at the very top of the market, some actresses and models were said to charge around Rp. 1,000,000 (at the time equivalent to \$1,560). The same authors also estimate that the financial turnover of the heterosexual sex industry in Indonesia in the early 1990s ranged from \$1,180 million in the low estimate to \$3,300 million in the high estimate, or between 0.8 and 2.4 percent of Indonesia's GDP (see also *Infobank*, 1990).

These figures imply relatively higher earnings when compared with those that could be earned by unskilled women with low levels of education when working in other sectors. No wonder that most studies concur that economic considerations play a major role in motivating women to become sex workers. A survey undertaken in 1994 in Jakarta by the daily newspaper *Pos Kota* and the Municipal Social Office found that 61 percent of the prostitutes took up the profession for economic reasons, 18 percent because they were hurt by either former husband or boyfriend, eight percent after being trapped by someone and finding themselves unable to free themselves, while another six percent said they were persuaded by their peers. Divorced women, responsible for the maintenance of their children, appear to be over-represented in the sex industry (*The Jakarta Post*, 1994).

The same survey further concluded that prostitution provides livelihood not only to the prostitute, her children and her family,⁷ but also to an extended network

of other parties, including sellers, parking attendants and security men. More exactly, on the average, a prostitute spends half of her income on personal needs (including partner's needs), 25 percent for helping her family in her hometown and another 25 percent for miscellaneous expenditures, such as fees for security men and payoffs to her pimp (*The Jakarta Post*, 1994). Similarly, a study undertaken in 1991 calculated that sex-workers in the Encim Jangrik *lokalisasi* in Jakarta only received 14.3 percent of their income, while the remaining profit benefited government institutions, local elites, sellers and others in the informal sectors, and even military men, up to 180 other persons who were the main income earners in their respective families (Bachtar in Hadiz, Aripurnami & Sabaroedin, 1992:4-5).

Needless to say, the many individuals and institutions profiting from commercial sex, as well as the clients who make use of it, want to maintain the business and keep it running. In some regions in Java, West Kalimantan and North Sulawesi, which are known as suppliers of sex workers, prostitution is widely accepted, especially since sex workers often contribute to development activities and provide financial aid to village activities:

A woman who has succeeded economically as a result of prostitution will likely become a kind of model for the community. The success may lie in her achievement to amass money as shown in the construction of a house and in the possession of luxurious furniture, or in a marriage to a prominent person. In a Central Java village, for example, there was a prostitute who married a businessman in Jakarta. The prostitute's family contributed Rp. 15 million for the construction of a grand mosque in the village. The prostitute's generosity has been made a model by the village community, and serves as a reference for certain parents. It is therefore not uncommon for some parents to want their own daughters to be like her... (Kuntjoro in *The Jakarta Post*, 1995).

Acceptance of prostitution is not only grounded in personal interest. There is also a part of society that, although it despises the sex trade and is concerned about upholding public morality, nonetheless has difficulties in conceiving its abolishment:

Why have a number of observers raised questions about the efficacy of the ... anti-prostitution campaign? Certainly, it is not because they do not find the sex trade degrading or because they endorse a free circulation of smut. Rather, it is because there are so many factors to consider, all of which contribute to the proliferation of pornography and prostitution. There is for example, the problem of rural poverty, which may not be the only cause of prostitution, but certainly is a major contributing factor. Then, too, there is the still widely accepted double standard, which demands virtuousness in women but condones promiscuity in men. In the sex trade, as in any other, it has been said that as long as there are buyers, there will be sellers. And,

indeed, it is for that very reason that prostitution is known as the oldest profession on earth (*The Jakarta Post*, 1994; see also Hadiz, Aripurnami & Sabaroedin, 1992a: 14).

However, social groups holding more “permissive” or “pragmatic” views have often been unable or unwilling to manifest them in public, since prostitution is generally considered a taboo. Only a few NGOs, such as Yayasan Kusuma Buana and Hot Line Surya, have recently started to openly advocate the legalization of prostitution to better protect the sex workers from the growing threat of HIV/AIDS and from physical and emotional abuses due to their illegal status. The majority of the people has simply abstained from taking sides. In the absence of public debate, Indonesians have tended to ignore the existence of the sex industry or to minimize its extent, preferring not to look at “embarrassing” truths. As Blowfield (1992:5) puts it: “prostitution is one of those aspects of Indonesian culture that sits on the uncertain between reality and denial.” When asked about prostitution, most respondents prefer to point to Thailand as the real “sex paradise” of Southeast Asia or to comment that prostitution and *seks bebas* (free sex) are “malaises” of the West, which are not original elements of Indonesian culture. It is this attitude of denial — defined by some as *munafik* (hypocritical) — that is denounced with verve in the following editorial of *The Jakarta Post*:

Incongruously, numerous Indonesians console themselves by assuming that “eastern” society is “more pious” in sexual matters than the allegedly “degenerate” West. Then how do we account for the ever-blooming industry of prostitution? It is alleged that Bangkok cannot hold a candle in size to the infamous Dolly complex in Surabaya. Indonesia’s cultural unease with sex and the naked flesh is eternalized by the stringent censorship carried out by the Minister of Information. Apparently 20th century Indonesians are primitive in sexual matters compared to the 14th century Majapahit people who incorporated the phallic symbol of lingga and the symbol of the female genitals yoni in their public temples. In some temples, reliefs of coitus, the ancient form of what we now call pornography, have been discovered. More perplexingly, contemporary Indonesians, who are allegedly endowed with all the moral eastern virtues, are no less lascivious than any other race in the world. Both statistics and production houses can testify that the most saleable local movies are those with a lame plot but crowded with scenes of copulation, raunchily entitled, *Forbidden Pleasures* or *Kept Man*. Meanwhile, hotels and motels have been silent witnesses to innumerable sexual sagas and extra-marital affairs, outstripping the excitement of most soap operas... (Nugroho in *The Jakarta Post*, 1998).

Criticisms apart, such “fabrication of moral pretenses” and “obsession with keeping up appearances” as Nugroho (*idem*) calls it, has dominated public discourse, ironically allowing the continuation of the sex industry. By formally ignoring

or denying prostitution, Indonesian society has *de facto* tolerated its existence. As a result, occasional attacks by small groups of religious moralists, undertaken mostly during the Muslim fasting month (Ramadhan) or in connection with religious feast, have, until recently, failed to provoke general uproar:

Strong emotional arguments for the elimination of prostitution take on religious overtones and induce support or at least lip-service from political leaders periodically, but while the moralizing provokes police raids and mobilization of community complaints against sex business, generally the community at large reacts negatively to actions which are meant to shame the sex-workers or small-scale pimps or clients, and calls for limits to what they regard as official "over-reacting" (Jones, Sulistyaningsih & Hull:49; see also *The Jakarta Post*, 1994).

The government used to respond to the complaints of *ulama* (religious leaders) and religious oriented groups only from time to time by starting demonstrative crackdowns on vendors of pornographic material or operators of prostitution houses (*The Jakarta Post*, 1994a; 1994b; 1995a; 1996; 1996a). Especially, illegal brothels, high-profile pimps and entertainment places without license would become the target of police diligence. However, these anti-prostitution drives never lasted long, and quietly ceased after they had succeeded in soothing public conscience. In due time, pimps would be released or bailed out, brothels reopened and entertainment places granted the necessary permits:

Society and, even more, the government prefers to close their eyes not to see the sex industry due to the many benefits they receive. This can be elicited from the way authorities treat pimps. Even if once in a while they do a raid, mostly against illegal hotels offering commercial sex, everybody knows that this is just some kind of promotion if not some kind of renegotiation about security fees. As a matter of fact, the raid and the sealing of hotels are only temporary and never last more than one month (Dhia Prekasha Yoedha, 1995:8).

It was only when Indonesia started to undergo political transformation that prostitution began to encounter opposition on an unprecedented scale and violence. Political reforms have become entrenched with moralistic demands.

Political Reform as a Moral Reform

In the course of 1997, citizens' voices opposing prostitution became louder and louder. In a crescendo, proclaimed Islamic values started to dominate public discourse and to affect political decisions. Across the archipelago, an increasing

number of civil groups, often led by students, took to the streets to protest against prostitution and other “vices” on religious grounds. Their moralist movement grew in intensity during Ramadhan — which started in the second half of December 1997 and ended in the second half of January 1998 — catching the attention of the public and the mass media:

Last Monday, twenty members of the Student Senate of the Muhammadiyah University in Mataram came to the Provincial Government... They asked the authorities to deal with ... prostitution, alcohol and the many billiard places where people gamble... (*Jawa Pos*, 28/10/1997).

Yesterday, the *Generasi Muda Islam Surabaya* (The Young Muslim Generation of Surabaya) staged a demonstration of moral concern in front of the Provincial Government building in Yos Soedarso Street. They held seven posters and three large banners... This demonstration (against immoral acts) involved 85 youngsters and students from various universities in Surabaya. In the three banners, the students made 10 requests: enhance mental education; issue association laws; take harsh measures against abortion; control AIDS; *berantas* (wipe out) *lokalisasi*; close all entertainment places, sites of immorality; eliminate pornography, violence and horror in publicity and films; review the policy on illegal brothels; regulate the mass media; and practice political transparency... (*Jawa Pos*, 19/12/1997a).

Early yesterday, 26 students IPB protested in front of the Bogor mayoralty office, demanding authorities to haul down soft porno and wage a campaign against prostitution... “We want the mayoralty to move against pornography and prostitution in this city during the holy month of *Ramadhan*,” said Agus Purwoko, the group’s spokesman (*The Jakarta Post*, 13/1/1998a).

After *Ramadhan*, the protests did not diminish, as normally would have been the case. On the contrary, religious discontent further spread around the country and assumed a more political character. Elimination of prostitution became part of the reformist political agenda. The *Orde Baru* (New Order) government of President Suharto was accused of promoting, during its 32 years in power, political practices that were amoral and unethical, including the protection of prostitution. As one leader of the student movement contended: “Considering the existing political context, it is not surprising that criminality and prostitution have flourished, since all these evils are rooted in the moral crisis affecting the Indonesian nation, namely the sinking of moral values and ethics among those in power” (*Suara Pembaruan*, 1998).

In their striving for a clean and transparent government, students and other civil groups accused government officials of protecting prostitution and other immoral practices for the sake of financial gains. As one protester argued, “If the administration wants to earn monthly revenues, why don’t they employ morally

appropriate strategies?" Mayors and other local authorities were put on the spot and held accountable for the moral decadence "triumphing" in their administrative areas. The protesters claimed that they had been patient for too long, and that in the spirit of social reform they could no longer tolerate the delay in implementing Islamic rules. The mayoralty ought to observe religious precepts, close all prostitution complexes and no longer issue permits for entertainment locations. The reformist movement also demanded that those who refused or failed to comply with the people's wishes should resign from their current posts.

Initially, local authorities only showed tepid reactions. In most places, they tried to gain time in the hope that emotions would eventually cool down, as had been the case in the past. Officials insisted that the rehabilitation of prostitutes could not be achieved in a short time and that if sex-workers were not allowed to operate in *lokalisasi* they would soon be "roaming the streets" and create new problems. They also tried to explain that dealing with prostitution was a complex matter, since besides affecting sex workers, pimps and clients, it also concerned the subsistence of entire neighborhoods. Some municipalities, including Jakarta, proposed, as a temporary measure, to "maintain the *lokalisasi*, but enforce a policy of full rehabilitation." Prostitutes would only be allowed to work during specific hours and the areas where prostitution was permitted would not be allowed to swell (*The Jakarta Post*, 1997a). Other municipalities promised to eventually close the brothels after a transitory period to prepare the sex workers and their pimps for a new job (*Suara Pembaruan*, 1998a).

In their "taking time" local officials received the support of the sex workers and other inhabitants of the *lokalisasi* and its surroundings who feared the loss of incomes in a period of economic recession (*Jawa Pos*, 1998; 1998a). However, at the same time, the authorities' attitude, perceived as "nonchalant," further enraged those Muslim groups who were eager to take stride as a moral and political force. Increasingly, demonstrations turned violent, bolstering a worrisome trend initiated the previous year, when attacks of prostitution complexes suddenly became part of ethnic and religious conflicts — often engineered for political motives. For instance, in Ujung Pandang during the ethnic riots which erupted on September 17, 1997, recreation places were also ravaged:

The riots shocked almost the entire city. The mass started to move Monday evening at about 23:00, after they received the news that Anni was dead. People threw stones at all the shops and houses of Chinese along the main roads. Cars and motors that were found on the streets were burned. The riots continued until Tuesday... Besides destroying the housing complexes, the mass also burned all kinds of entertainment places in the area... The first

building that was burned was a massage parlor and a karaoke venue, which was believed to function as prostitution place. The door was hit with stones and forcibly opened. As soon as it was broken, tens of people went inside and destroyed everything. Beer bottles were thrown out, although few were drunk. Not long thereafter fire was stoked... When the mass standing outside saw the fire expand, they also came into action. One by one, all entertainment places were burned (*Suara Pembaruan*, 1997).

However, it was in 1998, especially after the riots in Jakarta and the subsequent change in leadership, that violence started to be specifically targeted at entertainment and prostitution venues. The riots were either a reaction to the perceived delay of local authorities in dealing with prostitution or were sparked by disappointment at the ease with which governmental officials retracted their earlier promises of closing down prostitution complexes, as the following quotations show:

Rioting erupted Wednesday in the North Sumatra town of Tanjungbalai... The authorities are still investigating what provoked the riot, but some witnesses said that it was started by a number of people who went to the local legislature to protest rampant gambling, prostitution, smuggling, drinking and alleged nepotism (*The Jakarta Post*, 29/1/1998).

Hundreds of young men in Puworejo, staged a demonstration and burned the *lokalisasi* of Keseneng. As a result, 7 pimps and 115 sex workers had to run away. Furthermore, eight houses near the complex were ruined and partly burned. After they burned the *lokalisasi*, the demonstrators moved to the South of the city and destroyed discotheques, karaoke and entertainment places since they believe that there immoral acts were undertaken... Actually, the residents had already asked for a long time the closure of the prostitution complexes, but the authorities had not taken any action. In the end, the mass became angry and prone to violence... (*Suara Pembaruan*, 27/6/1998b).

Burning and looting of the prostitution complex in Grobogan started on Friday. Hundreds of people participated in the action since they were not satisfied with the efforts of the local government to resolve the problem of prostitution, which they had already protested... This *lokalisasi*, which was coordinated by five pimps, had already been declared closed one week before: "But in less that one week it was open again. The pimps dared to reopen their practices because they had backing from some individuals in the military"... Seeing this state of affairs, the residents lost their patience...(Jawa Pos, 28/6/1998b).

In the absence of national policies to refer to and lacking the support of the central government, local authorities found themselves unable to reject moral claims made in a political climate, wherein Islamic voices increasingly played a dominant role. Even if many government officials did not believe in the effectiveness of closing

down prostitution places, they did not dare to confront popular pressure demanding a strict observance of Islamic law.⁸ One after the other, prostitution complexes were declared closed, first in Yogyakarta and Magelang in Central Java, and later on in other cities across the country. Even legendary complexes — such as the *lokalisasi* of Silir in Solo, which had been established in 1961 and served as a model for successive brothels in Indonesia⁹ — were shut down and their inhabitants expelled. Pimps were required to end their business while prostitutes were advised to “leave the *lembah hitam* (literally “dark dale”) and become good persons again” by going back to their villages (*Jawa Pos*, 1998c). In some cases, they were given a modest sum of money to assist them in their immediate needs. But, as one of them complained: “What can I do with a subsidy of just Rp. 150,000? I am worried about my future. My only source of income is now exhausted, what other job can I do now? After all I do not have any expertise or capital to start a business” (*Jawa Pos*, 1998d).

Nobody, however, seemed to listen to such laments and objections. The decisiveness of local authority was applauded by the surrounding society and received the blessings of religious leaders at the national level. With enthusiasm, Muslim preachers and experts proposed the launching of the *Gerakan Nasional Pengantasan-WTS* (National Movement to Eliminate Prostitutes), a national drive to close all *lokalisasi* in the country. Severe punishments for the “culprits” were also sought. Voicing the aspiration of many of his colleagues, the Chairman of the Council of *Ulama*,¹⁰ Ali Yafie argued for a legislative change: “Promiscuity can ruin our young generation. Therefore, it should be punished as hard as possible. To do this, we need to change our Criminal Law, which is too light for adulterers. It is better to apply Islamic Law” (*Republika*, 1999). In the same line of thought, many argued for the practice of the punishment of *rajam* (stoning) for the sex workers and for those committing *zina* (adultery). Elimination of prostitution even became an integral part of the new political agenda. In the eve of the election, Muslim parties, including Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN), Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (KB) and Partai Bintang Bulan (PBB), firmly promised that if they would win, they would close all the *tempat maksiat* (immoral places) once and for all (*Suara Pembaruan*, 1999).

However, this attainment of moral rectitude appears quite difficult to realize. In the process, many unforeseen side-effects have started to arise. Somehow paradoxically, the closure of the *lokalisasi* has complicated the task of the police in dealing with street prostitution. Sex workers arrested on the streets, who usually would have been placed in a *lokalisasi*, unexpectedly had no “rehabilitation” places to go:

The raid of WTS in Kalijodo conducted by the North Jakarta forces appears

to have caused a new problem. It is not clear where the 150 prostitutes who have been arrested will be placed... Normally, the prostitutes would have been sent to Kramat Tunggak or would have been placed in the *Panti Rehabilitasi Wanita* (PRW) Mulya Jaya Pasar Rebo... Now Kramat Tunggak has been declared closed per December 1999 and cannot receive new inhabitants, while the PRW has only limited places... If they cannot be placed, they will have to be released again...

At the same time, the closure of *lokalisasi* has not led to the expected diminution of the number of prostitutes. Few of the sex workers expelled from the *lokalisasi* have returned to their villages, preferring to continue practicing, albeit in more informal venues. In some cases, they have sought new business opportunities in neighboring areas. At times, their movement has been so massive that it has created discomfort to the local population, as the following case shows:

Balinese society is complaining about the arrival of prostitutes from East Java who are disrupting existing cultural norms. Not only they operate illegally in public places, but they have even entered rural villages... Since the *lokalisasi* in East Java were destroyed and burned by the mass, hundreds of WTS started their exodus to Bali to restart their business since Bali is considered a safe place. It has been estimated that this month about 700 prostitutes from East Java have begun to practice in tourist locations such as Kuta Sanur and Semawang. Besides working in closed places, such as hotels, bars and karaokes, they also operate on the streets, even in small hamlets... As a result there are now many illegal prostitution places... The daring and indecent attitude of these prostitutes is causing uneasiness among the people since they do not know and respect Hinduism and do not care if children watch their deeds... (*Jawa Pos*, 1998e).

In other instances, sex workers have just stayed in the same city, simply opting to operate in the unorganized sector:

Since it was announced that Silir would be closed, many WTS started to operate near the RRI Building and Balapan Station. The place does not really matter. In that area there are many cheap lodgings... Actually, Solo is not the only city having this problem. In Jakarta, ... although the prostitution venues in Kali Jodo, Grogol and the Boker complex at Jalan Raya Bogor have been closed, the prostitutes have not moved and still operate on the streets. Besides these two places, "wild" (*liar*) prostitution can also be found in Rawa Malang, Cilincing (*Gatra*, 1998).

Although hard data are not available yet, these early observations seem to indicate that street prostitution has been bolstered by the closure of the *lokalisasi*. Prostitutes previously sheltered in the brothel complexes now have to earn their living on the streets, exposed to even greater health and safety hazards at a time when the economic crisis further endangers their subsistence.

Prostitution as a Source of Scarce Income

The economic crisis is affecting the sex industry in many ways. The most direct impact is the expansion of prostitution because of the increase in the number of girls and women who enter this sector out of poverty (Ascobat Gani, 1998:2). In Indonesia as well as in other Southeast Asian countries, women have been among those worst hit by the crisis. After having entered the industrial labor force in large numbers, Indonesian women workers have found themselves reeling from unemployment during the crisis because the majority of companies dismissing employees are in export sectors, such as textiles, garments and shoes, which employ mostly women (ADB, 1998). It is also a common practice for companies having financial difficulties to first lay off unskilled workers, who most often happen to be women. The International Labor Organization (ILO) in Jakarta estimates that of the 13 million unemployed in Indonesia today due to the crisis, 43 percent are female workers (*TWN*, 1998).

In search of incomes, women factory workers who lost their jobs are forced to settle for lower-paying jobs, try to find jobs to do at home as subcontractors, or provide various services in the informal sector. One option in this context is for women to turn to the sex industry as it appears from the following remark:

I do not have money for my daily needs. To find a job nowadays is difficult. What can I do? I cannot but work like this... In the beginning I was working in a textile company in Karawang but I was fired because of the economic crisis. I need food and my parents even more so. They do not have anything, they do not own a rice field or a garden that can be cultivated. How are we supposed to get the money while the price of basic food has increased and my savings have already been exhausted?... Yes, I cannot be engaged in *seks krismon* (sex because of the monetary crisis)! (*Media Indonesia*, 1998:4).

In line with this newspaper's report, a study recently undertaken by the Center for Urban Development Studies in the Yogyakarta-based Gadjah Mada University found that economic pressure is compelling a growing number of Indonesians into prostitution and that "many sacked female workers in Indonesia's Java island have switched to sex-related jobs to survive" (*TWN*, 1998:2). This problem has also been recognized by the Indonesian government. On July 1998, the Minister of Social Affairs, Justika Baharsjah, claimed that about 11,000 ex-factory workers have entered prostitution, not being able to go back to their villages nor to find a new job, since most of the factories have closed their operations:

In the outskirts of Jakarta, Semarang and Batam there are 4,000 women who have become WTS after being sacked, whereas in Riau there are about 7,000 new prostitutes... We do not like this situation, but it is our reality... People who have been fired and now live in the urban suburbs are not willing to go back to their villages. They prefer to wait for the industrial sector to recover. Besides, many of them have already brought their families to the city. It is sad to see that a part of the girls and women have fallen into prostitution (*Pikiran Rakyat*, 1998).

Prostitution has also become a last resort for those women who have seen their living standards reduced because of pay cuts and inflation or because their husbands have become unemployed:

After my husband was laid off he tried to look for a job in another place, but without result. No company wanted new employees. In the end, confused, stressed and pressed by daily needs, I asked my husband's permission to work here [as street prostitute]. Against his will, my husband eventually gave his permission while crying. I hope that I will not stay long in this place. If I succeed in buying a motor as work capital for my husband, I will stop working here (*Media Indonesia*, 1998:4).

In the unfolding of the crisis, incapacity to meet educational costs also drove some young women to prostitution. In instances where students and their parents could no longer afford to pay for the tuition fee, the books and other related costs, commercial sex became an additional source of income:

"I cannot pay my tuition fees," says Lisa, a 20-year old engineering student at the Surabaya Institute of Technology. She now leaves her campus every afternoon... and travels to [the red-light district of] Jarak to earn a living (AFP, 1998).

My parents are poor... The crisis made us even more poor. In the beginning I did not want to be involved in commercial sex and tried to search for comfort into religion, but on the long run I was not strong enough. At school, I also need pocket money. I have to maintain my status, I need all kinds of things. Who cares what people say (*Media Indonesia*, 1998:4).

The financial crisis has further worsened girls' dropout from education, indirectly fostering their involvement in sexual activities at an early age. Indonesian families have traditionally privileged male education as a form of investment for the future. The 1993 IFLS survey found a clear gender gap among the poorest quintile in primary school enrollments and among all income groups at high school (UNFPA and ANU, 1998:49). This pattern has become more acute with the crisis. For families struggling to overcome financial difficulties and having less resources to send all their children to school, it is most often the daughters who are held back to marry

off, carry out household tasks or be sent to work. In impoverished families, especially in urban areas, some of these girls end up in prostitution (*Asiaweek*, 1999:44; Iskandar, 1998:70). As the Assistant to the Minister of Women Affairs, Abdul Cholil, stated:

Many families have been forced to withdraw their daughters from school and send them out to seek employment, marry them off, use them as "collateral" for bad loans, or even force them into prostitution (*Jakarta Post*, 1998b).

In this context, it is not surprising that a recent qualitative survey undertaken for UNFPA found support for media reports that young girls from the poor areas in West Java were brought by their parents to brothels in Jakarta and "sold" for a number of years (UNFPA and ANU, 1998:64). With regard to the increase in early marriages, it is worrisome to think that girls married at a young age may soon find themselves divorced, becoming vulnerable to commercial sex (Irwanto, 1998:33). More generally, it can be said that children (both male and female) have been badly affected by the crisis, as reflected in the increasing rate of child labor, youth crime and child prostitution. Reduced demand by industrial and household enterprises has pushed children into the streets, where they scramble to make a living as street singers, beggars, cigarette vendors and, if necessary, as sex workers (Irwanto, 1998:31). On June 1999, there were about 5,000 street children in Surabaya, an increase from 2,000 children before the economic crisis (*Jakarta Post*, 1999). Trafficking of women and children is also increasing, as the value of the rupiah has declined, making sex transactions advantageous for foreign clients.

The economic crisis is also putting a strain on family relationships, indirectly fostering prostitution. Unemployment and the sharp fall in purchasing power appear to be recurrent sources of conflict for many Indonesian families (UNFPA and ANU, 1998:65). There is evidence that domestic violence and the number of divorces is augmenting. In Jakarta, the number of divorce applications increased from 1,713 in October 1997 to 2,590 in February 1998 (Baillie in Pernia and Knowles, 1998:6). From experience, divorced women in financial difficulties are more prone to enter the sex industry than married women.

All the above trends have led to an increase in the number of prostitutes, or more particularly of street prostitutes, since, as previously argued, most *lokalisasi* have been closed. In the streets, new prostitutes have to compete for work with the growing number of prostitutes expelled from the brothels. This oversupply has, in turn, caused a decrease in the number of clients and in the price of sex transactions. All over the country, sex workers complain that they have less clients compared to

before the economy crashed. In Surabaya, prostitutes who used to have at least one client a day, in late 1998 only had three to five a week (Tan, 1998:5). Sex workers also complain that their tariffs have lost value in the face of growing inflation and that in many instances, tariffs have even decreased. For example, a young prostitute recently told the press that she was previously charging Rp. 150,000 for one transaction, but that after the crisis she was only able to earn Rp. 25,000 (Gatra, 1998). For those prostitutes previously working in *lokalisasi* that have been shut down, an additional complaint is that with the decline in status, their tariff has also diminished. More generally, the decrease in prices has hit the entire sector, including the free-lancers who cater to a foreign clientele:

There is no doubt that life is getting tougher for Jakarta's bar girls... Girls who used to go to a "better class" of establishment, such as five-star hotels, are finding this too expensive now. They are beginning to frequent the less desirable places. Even there, though, the cost of the drink they must buy to gain entry into these clubs have more than doubled recently. The girls now have to invest more, so receiving returns is even more important. Opportunities to form "permanent relationships" are also thinning out (*The Jakarta Post*, 1998c). Another effect of the crisis is that the girls need to work more often and be less choosy about who they go home with. According to "Tati," "I used to have a choice of the men I went home with. Now they are all leaving. I feel like I have to go with whoever I can find" (*The Jakarta Post*, 1998c).

Besides feeling that they can no longer select their clients — thus being exposed to greater risk of abuse and exploitation — sex workers also encounter difficulties in buying condoms to protect themselves. Not only has the price of condoms increased, but prostitutes and their clients, having both less incomes, are not inclined to purchase them. As one street hawker declared: "Before, I sold one condom for Rp. 1,000, now it is Rp. 2,000 and I do not sell many." Similarly, sex workers have difficulties in purchasing antibiotics and other drugs that they would normally use for treating STDs and other ailments, and have to resort to traditional remedies and to a range of less conventional methods. Needless to say, this inability to protect themselves poses a risk to the health of both prostitutes and their customers. Many predict that the economic crisis will contribute to a future rise in HIV and STD infections (Tan, 1998:5).

Some Afterthoughts

One month after the election, Indonesia is still counting the votes. Initial enthusiasm about the democratization process is now giving way to disappointment

and apathy. Nobody dares to predict in which direction the country will move. Consequently, it is difficult to tell, whether the analysis provided in this paper will still be relevant for future developments or only remain valid as documentation of a phase in Indonesian history. Still, if we assume for a moment that the political movement of moral *reformasi* and the economic shortcomings will persist for the time being, then we should be seriously concerned about the fate of Indonesian sex workers. Although hard data is missing, circumstantial evidence, as presented here, clearly show two opposite tendencies. Somehow, ironically, at a point in time when brothels are being closed down, a substantial increase in the amount of sex workers is occurring, leading to the swelling of the informal, "wild," sector. This, in turn, implies that more sex workers are exposed to the hazards of street prostitution, other physical violence and abuse and a higher risk of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. Health concerns are further aggravated by the realization that economic considerations prevent people from applying the necessary preventive and curative measures. In the process, not only is the human dignity of sex workers disregarded, but they are also deprived of a safe work environment and of potential means of subsistence. Grounded in these observations, there seems to be an urgent need to give more attention to the sex industry in social safety net programs. Finding a balance between ideological and pragmatic positions, efforts should be made to formulate policy and interventions directed at safeguarding the human rights of sex workers and assist them in their struggle for livelihood, while protecting their health and those of their customers. As Adi Sasongko, an Indonesian AIDS activist said (*The Jakarta Post*, 1999): "Even if they are sex workers, they also have rights like any other Indonesian" and we should not "neglect them at their time of greatest need."¹⁰

Notes

¹ This paper was written in June 1999. Although the political situation has since changed, and Indonesia looks forward to a brighter future under the leadership of President Abdurrahman Wahid and Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri, the issues discussed in this paper remain relevant, since the

political and economic trends affecting prostitution described here still continue to this day.

²A complete description of the crisis is beyond the scope of this paper. I refer interested readers to Chandrakirana and Zakaria 1999; Frankenberg *et al.* 1999, 1999a; Hananto Sigit and Sudarti Surbakti 1999; UN 1998; World Bank 1998.

³These regencies are: Indramayu, Karawang and Kuningan in West Java; Pati Jepara, Grobogan and Wonogiri in Central Java; and Blitar, Malang and Banyuwangi in East Java.

⁴The Musyawarah Pimpinan Daerah (Muspida) consists of regional administrators and the local prosecutors, police chief and military commander.

⁵The decision to combat STDs through a monthly shot of penicillin is questionable, considering the virus resistance due to the prolonged use of antibiotics (see further Sciortino, 1995:195).

⁶The translation of this and following quotations from Bahasa Indonesia are mine.

⁷According to Kuntjoro (1989), a prostitute can feed up to 18 extended family members.

⁸Information provided by Dr. Agus Dwiyanto, Director of the Population Research Center of Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta on May 1999.

⁹More exactly, the *lokalisasi* of Silir was closed down on July 27, 1998 with the Mayor's Decree no. 462.3/094/1998.

¹⁰In Bahasa Indonesia: Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI).

¹¹Paraphrase from Gautam's remarks on children in the crisis (*Asiaweek*, 1999).

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