

Romina Alejandra BEHRENS

Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia Austral. Argentina. rominabehrens@gmail.com

Institutional transition from regulation to abolitionism concerning prostitution in the printed press of Río Gallegos, Argentina

La transición institucional del reglamentarismo al abolicionismo acerca de la prostitución en la prensa gráfica de Río Gallegos, Argentina

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Abstract

In Río Gallegos (south of Argentine, Patagonia), formerly, brothels were located on public lands relinquished by the local administration and controlled in accordance with the appropriate regulation. Subsequently, an institutional adjustment was performed implying intensification of the national abolitionist model - from the 2008 Trafficking of People Act and its amendment in 2012- in a peripheral region with a strong regulatory tradition. In this context, the history of prostitution in Río Gallegos is studied via the historical changes in the regulation of prostitution at national and local levels. In this way, discursive changes from media representations based on institutional, political, police and social organisations sources are analysed. Examining this institutional transition will afford us understanding of how trends in discourses are redefined around the meanings of prostitution based on legislative changes and cultural transformations on the way women's bodies are conceptualised.

Keywords

Discourses; historical changes; Las Casitas; prostitution; regulation.

Resumen

En Río Gallegos (sur de la Patagonia Argentina) hubo una época en la que los prostibulos estaban instalados en terrenos fiscales cedidos por la Intendencia local y se controlaban mediante regulaciones asociadas al reglamentarismo. A eso continuó una adaptación institucional que implicó la profundización del modelo abolicionista nacional –a partir de la ley de trata de personas del 2008 y su modificación en el 2012– en una región periférica con una fuerte tradición reglamentarista. En este sentido, pensamos la historia de la prostitución en Río Gallegos a partir de los cambios históricos en la regulación de la prostitución a nivel nacional y local. De esta manera, nos interesa atender a los cambios discursivos a partir de las representaciones que construyen los medios de comunicación y que se basan en fuentes institucionales, políticas, policiales y de organizaciones sociales. Observar esta transición institucional nos permite comprender cómo se redefinen los horizontes discursivos en torno a los significados de la prostitución a partir de los cambios legislativos y de las transformaciones culturales sobre los modos en los que se conciben los cuerpos de las mujeres.

Palabras clave

Cambios históricos; discursos; Las Casitas; prostitución; regulaciones.

1. Introduction

The aim of the investigation we present here is the reconstruction of a genealogy of knowledges, practices and public actions around prostitution in the last century (1912-2012) in the southern-peripheral space of national territory, focusing on the negotiation processes in which women who exercise prostitution are involved. With this objective, we first reconstruct the practices deployed by women who exercise prostitution in the different historical moments illustrated by this genealogy, framed by their negotiations with hegemonic social discourses, their daily interaction, their material conditions of inequality and the collective struggles for organization and significance. Secondly, we explain the hegemonic processes in which prostitution is inscribed such as collective struggles for organization and the dispute for meaning around prostitution. Finally, we peruse and analyze discursive formations about prostitution in hegemonic social discourses (political, institutional, police, health and judicial discourses) produced during relevant moments in the selected timeline, taking them as spaces of production and reinforcement of socio-sexual imaginaries.

In this paper we develop a facet of a PhD investigation^[1], centered on the institutional transition from reglamentarism to abolitionism registered in the period of 2008-2013. During the last ten years, Argentina deepened its abolitionist model based on the creation of Act 26.364 for prevention and penalty of human trafficking and assistance for its victims – commonly known as the human trafficking act (*ley de trata*) – passed in 2008 and modified in 2012. This Act appeared after the diffusion of the case of Marita Veron (a tucumane woman who disappeared on the 3rd of April 2002, with great international repercussion given the relentless search of her mother, Susana Trimarco, who created the Foundation María de los Ángeles for the fight against human trafficking with strong support from women organizations in the country).

The context during those years was characterized by abolitionist national legislations, frequent rescue of victims of human trafficking, the lessening of local reglamentarism measures and the debate about whether considering prostitution as a job or not. The city of Rio Gallegos is considered a destination city in the map of human trafficking for sexual exploitation (UFASE, 2012), but there also exist local traditions about prostitution that enter into conflict with abolitionist politics, drawing from social imaginaries that consider prostitution as a “necessary evil” and as an activity inherent to local culture.

In June 2009, the federal shutdown of the 29 brothels situated behind Rio Gallegos bus station in the neighbourhood known as “Las Casitas” constituted a turning point for local citizens. For a great number of citizens and tourists, the spacial distribution condensed in 2 blocks in the outskirts of the city was cause for curiosity and certain pride due to the planned and controlled way in which prostitution was organized. Nonetheless, it would be simply false to say that prostitution was only exercised in “Las Casitas”, since there were other places like bars, night clubs, *boliches*^[2], *whiskeries* and *cabarets* spread all over the city.

This was so since the founding of the city in 1885, with the arrival of the first port to the region, until the time in which this thesis takes place. In Rio Gallegos, the offer for commercial sex was a concern for lawmakers, government authorities and neighbours ever since the founding of the Town Council and during the following periods in which the male radicalization politics took place based on the zone’s militarization and the extractivist models applied in the adjacent regions, including the present time in which cultural tradition hasn’t stopped prioritizing prostitution, specifically female and heterosexual prostitution.

In spite of the permanent tensions between the demands of brothels and the practices of women who exercise prostitution, and the discourses that originate in spaces of power like the Police, the Government of Santa Cruz and the ex National Territory, the local Township and shopkeepers and citizens, prostitution has a peculiar dimension reserved in the sexual life of Rio Gallegos, due to its place in local culture. The revision of historical sources carried out for this investigation have led us to find varied examples of specific events that took place during the last century that shed light upon this importance, and that show a conflictive contrast between local developments and national politics and other ways of prostitution in different places in the country, from conflicts between local authorization and national prohibition to the peculiarity of the latecoming of abolitionist politics in the last decade. The characterization that follows is a result of our own investigation process, since there are no previous studies about local prostitution, specially in its most contemporary dimension^[4].

The predominant academic production about prostitution in the articulation between Communication and Gender Studies focuses on the discourses about commercial sex (Justo von Lurzer 2008a, 2011, Brosa Hernandez, 2012, Gutierrez, 2012). Prostitution is frequently visited as object of studies that go through both fields. Their analysis circumscribe to media representations in papers and television shows in different countries. Results of this studies hold that media treatment is sensationalist and that mediatic productions link women with crime and immigration, drug trafficking, transmissible diseases, marginality and poverty, or with the condition of victim (Justo von Lurzer 2008a; Brosa Hernandez, 2012; Behrens 2012; Gutierrez, 2012); even the articles of Chilean working press of the first quarter of the XXth Century analyzed by Omar Maya

link prostitution to poverty and also alcoholism (2012). In addition to this, the mediatic messages that emphasise moral, higienic or personal problems rather than causes linked to the vulnerability of the women collective (Brosa Hernandez, 2012) end up construing a polarization between good people and dangerous people.

Some of this studies inscribe themselves in a broader group of academic productions that intend to articulate Gender Studies with Communication Studies in a strategic crossroads of topics and objects. That is to say, the concern for the gender/communication articulation is not based on the construction of problems in a theoretical-methodological sense, but on the contrasting of topics and objects circumscribed to media, women and representations, in which most results arrive to general and predetermined conclusions such as the reproduction of patriarchal sexual order (Elizalde, 2007). Predetermined conclusions entail the peril of *ideologism* (Barbero, 2010), that is, arriving to dicotomic interpretations between power structures and subordinate subjects without any capacity for action or critique, and, in a certain way, finding previously constructed answers, like that every message is sexist and that mass-culture is nocive for women (Justo von Lurzer; Spataro 2015).

In contrast, some investigations can be outlined. For instance, Leticia Sabsay noted that media constructions about women who practice comercial sex preclude the possibility of thinking them as social subjects from a citizen perspective, and put in circulation imaginaries charged with *moral panic* concerned for social higiene and morality, in accordance with politic and institutional discourses (Sabsay, 2011). Sabsay's work deals with the case of the brief reglamentation of prostitution in CABA in 2008, which inspired the author to analyze juridic and mediatic discourses, examining the uses of public spaces according to which bodies and which citizens can inhabit them. Her investigation is an important contribution to the study of how spaces are constued and how the possibility of drawing attention to stigmatized collectives in public spaces.

In the same vein, the investigation of Carolina Justo von Lurzer (2011) analyzes television shows produced in Argentina between 2000 and 2008, and notes that hegemonic ways of representation are characterized by the absence of political identities and social organization (2008b). Justo von Lurzer concludes that, paradoxically, it is the same hipervisibilization that makes the construction of ways of alternative visibilization of sexual workers so complex (2008a).

Therefore, this investigation intends to reconstruct the map of contradictions, the multiplicity of identities, the inscription of practices from the point of view of intersectionality around peripheric prostitution, fracturing the discursive formations of prostitution going back to local knowledges. That is why we are interested in discursive changes of institutions, politic areas, social organizations, specifically for this work, those that are represented in media. This transition allows us to understand how discursive horizons are redefined around the meanings of prostitution based on legislative changes and cultural transformations about the ways in which women's bodies are conceived. If we success in such a purpose, we will have contributed to the unceasing dynamics of the reconfiguration of posible imaginaries about prostitution.

In this sense, this investigation will maintain that what happens in a local level doesn't have a direct correspondence to a national context, and that this translates in cultural practices that contrast with a latecoming abolitionism.

2. Methodology

Cultural Studies invites us to undertake the study of active hegemonic processes in which semantic struggles are held, where signifiers are disputed as a form of resisting fixed domination structures, making place for alternative forms of identity, alternative cultural formations such as sexuality and relationships. *Cultural Studies* construct a theoretic and methodological scenario for the study of cultures and their relation with hegemonic processes in political and social contexts. Their contribution aims to understand this phenomenon in a symbolic dimension. That is to say, the fight for meaning around prostitution inscribes itself within the struggle for meaning in practices and knowledges in which subjects vinctulated to power relations between generic sexes are involved. In this sense, this investigation's framework is the broader problematization of the link between structures and subjects, between reproduction and change, it deepens in the conception of communication/culture proposed by the field, displacing the classical object – communication media – and replacing it with a new investigation problem that has knowledges and practices as symbolic elements of communication.

We also assume the genealogical option that allows us to ask for cultural forces that conform meanings of prostitution in a specific political and territorial context. In turn, these meanings can be interrogated through their historical changes to understand how and why certain subjects are given privileges in local culture, while others are excluded, ensuring at all times the focus on the negotiation in which women participate as subordinate subjects.

Additionally, the genealogical option elaborated by Michel Foucault suggests an epistemological and methodological perspective that strengthens the recommendation of cultural analysis from which we are interested in understanding, comprehending and interpreting the series of discourses that influence in the dispute for knowledges and practices around local prostitution.

This option does not intend so much to find the "origin" of history as to identify events^[5] "it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history-in sentiments [...] genealogy must define even those instances when they are absent, the moment when they remained unrealized" (Foucault, 1992, 5).

What is written about prostitution is related to knowledges about medicine, about administrative or legal issues (Morcillo, Justo von Lurzer, 2012). In a more recent period, the production of knowledge about prostitution is produced in institutional spaces, like government departments that elaborate programmes against human trafficking or other related organizations and investigations that work against human trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation, and other investigations that accompany the demands of organized women who fight for the acknowledgment of sexual labour. In this way, the practices of women who exercise prostitution – organized or not –, as long as they constitute buried or disqualified knowledges, account for historical facts that contrast with classical history about prostitution and the hegemonic model in which it was understood.

The genealogical critique has as an objective to "put in motion local, discontinuous, disqualified, unlegitimized knowledges against the unitary theoretic instance that pretended to filter, hierarchically organize, order them in the name of a Truthful Knowledge and put them into the jurisdiction of a science owned by somebody" (Foucault, 1976: 16). This is the double play of the critique, because at the same time that it works as a tool of the erudite discourse for the detachment of restrained knowledges, these are constitutive of the critique itself.

In reinvincating the subjective dimension and passions of who pries into non-formal historical documents, the archive proves to be more the footprints of an existence than a discursive production. In order to bring the history of "infamous women" to us, it was necessary "that a beam of light should, at least for a moment, illuminate them. A light which comes from somewhere else. What rescues them from the darkness of night where they would, and still should perhaps, have been able to remain, is an encounter with power" (Foucault, 1970: 124).

Complaints, quarrels, surveys, reports, accusations, interrogations are registered in writing and form enormous histories and archives, establishing a different relation between power, discourse and routine. Daily situations and some intimate situations where the cause for investigations and testimonies about the "infamous subjects". The archives were conformed then by that "that dubious murmuring that involves, like a dense fog, each and every one of them" (Foucault, 1970: 131).

In that sense, in the present article we reconstruct the discursive changes in a period of institutional transition that begins in 2008 with the proliferation of cases of human trafficking at the instances of the Human Trafficking Act, that deepens in 2009 with the federal shutdown of "Las Casitas" and that culminates in 2012, year in which the Human Trafficking Act is modified. Therefore, we will focus on the analysis of periodistic sources, the topics, objectives and tendencies of the articles, the definition of prostitution and the denominations of the women in the local diaries *Tiempo Sur* and *La Opinión Austral*.

The sample is constituted by all the news and press articles published between 2008 and 2013 in the digital version of *Tiempo Sur* and *La Opinión Austral*. In light of the investigation's main objectives, the selected period corresponds to an institutional transition from reglamentarism to abolitionism including three stages: before the shutdown of Las Casitas (2008-2009), after the shutdown (2010-2011), abolitionism/prohibitionism (2012-2013). We have considered those articles that cover prostitution topics as well as those with interviews to people related to the subject in virtue of their profession or their public function.

Finally, according to the selection criteria, we have selected 24 pieces for the 2008-2009 period, 8 pieces for the 2010-2011 period and 20 pieces for the 2012-2013 period.

3. Results

The variables in graphic press are analyzed according to changes in the conjuncture (the situation previous to the shutdown, following to the shutdown and abolitionism/prohibitionism). The representations of prostitution vary in the different materials between 2008 and 2013, including the federal shutdown in 2009 and an inflection point in 2012, year in which abolitionist politics were reinforced. Since the modification of the Human Trafficking Act, in which the figure of consent to exercise prostitution is eliminated and the difference between underaged and grownup is abandoned, all women that exercise prostitution are considered as victims of sexual exploitation and/or human trafficking. Until 2012, the Argentine legal system demanded that the victim should be able to prove her negative and resistance to aggression or rape by another. Lack of proof of the unwillingness of the act was considered as presupposition on consent. That is to say that with the modification, the victims are unable to express any will in a prostitution context.

Table 1 shows a sistematization of each category along the different stages in the analyzed period.

Table 1: Description of the categories

Categories	Before Shutdown 2008-2009	After Shutdown 2010-2011	Abolitionism/ Prohibitionism 2012-2013
Sources	Police, government authorities (province, local), owners, madames, legal representatives	Government authorities (province), electoral candidates, legal representatives	Government authorities (province: areas of Women and Human Rights), social organizations
Topics	Health control, working situation, legal situation	Controlling the activity, posible reopening, modification to local acts, moving	Derogating local acts, training and congresses about human trafficking
Objectives	Justification of the existence of brothels	Focus on the search for consensus	Emphasis on the prohibition of sexual offering
Tenndencies	Doubts about human trafficking	Distance with concrete cases. Progressive asimilation of human trafficking	Assertion of cases of human trafficking
Definition	"The oldest profession in the world"	Distinction between prostitution and human trafficking	Prostitution is human trafficking and/or exploitation
Denominations	Ladies of the night, Companion ladies, "alternadoras", saloon ladies, sexual workers, beautiful young women, "meretrices"	Workers of "Las Casitas", people, prostitutes, women who are obliged to prostitute, women, people of feminine gender	Working women, sold women that were sold, victims

Source: own elaboration.

3.1. Before Federal Shutdown

During 2008 and 2009, before the shutdown of the denominated "Casitas de Tolerancia" (*tolerance houses*) prostitution was refered to as "the oldest profession in the world" or as a job in case the source of the article were the owners or the legal representative of the brothels, and occasionally of some of the women who exercised prostitution ("Las Casitas: entre el mito y la realidad. *La Opinión Austral* 1/09/2009; Vivar: "Pasa un determinado tiempo y las pruebas mueren", *La Opinión Austral*, 4/12/2009).

The origin of local prostitution appears along with the myth of rapes in the idea that men "have sexual, physiological needs" that, when not being able to satisfy by consensued relations, lead them to raping or sexually abusing women. This myth justifies the existence of brothels in function of the great male population and the solitude of some men.

Truth be told, control is something most of those in favour of the reopening of the *lupanares*: "Las Casitas were born practically with the city, we mustn't forget that there was a numerous male

population here and that the Casitas were created to avoid rapes, as for me, I rather that the women are kept controlled there than seeing them at broad daylight, like you see them and the travesti, that's not good for families", pointed out the owner of a hotel that also said there were already two thousand signatures in favour of reopening the brothels ("Las Casitas, entre el mito y la realidad. *La Opinión Austral*, 1/09/09).

(...) the public servant remembered that [Las Casitas] have been running for decades and that in its time "they were seen as a solution for lonely men who came from the field", and also asserted that old neighbours of Rio Gallegos could talk about the rape rate before Las Casitas.

(...) "it is a human condition to attend to these places of recreation" and that [Las Casitas] are "necessary" (Romanín: "Si se lastima a las personas, yo voy a gritar" *La Opinión Austral*, 7/05/2009).

During this period the most frequently used terms to refer to women were: ladies of the night, companion ladies, "alternadoras", saloon ladies and sexual workers. A certain fetish tone can be observed by part of the media when it refers to the women as "beautiful young women", or when it decides to pair up a personal interview with a photograph of a semi-nude body ("Las Casitas, entre el mito y la realidad. *La Opinión Austral*, 1/09/09; Entre la psicología y el sexo, *La Opinión Austral*, 19/11/2009).

Before the shutdown of Las Casitas, in the midst of the debate for their legal situation outside the Town Council, the tematizations of the case lingered around the justification of the existence of these places based on the diminution of the raping rates or the physiological need of some men. For this the sources were public servants or neighbours, or employees of the Township like Santa Cruz's Minister of Government:

Much further went vice-governor Luis Hernán Martínez Crespo, in the inauguration of a water tower in Barrio San Benito, being questioned about his posture regarding the existence of *casitas de tolerancia*, who held that "it is a human condition to attend to these places of recreation" and that [Las Casitas] are "necessary" (Romanín: "Si se lastima a las personas, yo voy a gritar" *La Opinión Austral*, 7/05/2009).

We can also observe, in some punctual cases, how cases of human trafficking are undermined, putting in doubt the truthfulness of the accusations or discrediting women under the age of 18. In a specific case, a denunciation made by a group of women was discredited because there was no disappearance report in the province of origin.

According to official sources, the girls rescued in Rio Gallegos are native from Concepción (Tucuman) and there had been no police reports of disappearance or home escape related to them. This sheds doubts upon the truthfulness of the denunciations of the allegedly obliged to prostitute women (...) after the inconsistent declarations of the accusers themselves, that according to some sources near to Las Casitas, maintained a heavy debt with the owner, reason why they decided to make this accusation as a way of avoiding payment of the debt (No fue denunciada la desaparición de las tucumanas "supuestamente" rescatadas", *La Opinión Austral*, 25/03/2009).

In another order of things, when the source were the organizations that carried on the accusation or accompanying the victims, the news dealt with legal issues about the human trafficking denunciation.

3.2. After Federal Shutdown and during the local elections

In this period that begins with the shutdown in June 2009, news give a much broader space to political sources, as it was an electoral context (postulates to Mayor, Councillor, province Representatives and Governor). The legal representative of the brothels also appears in the press providing details of the legal situation or maintaining meetings with authorities, but the direct owners do not appear (Vuelven a pedir a la comuna la reapertura de "casitas", *Tiempo Sur*, 07/11/2012). In some cases sources – policemen and legal representatives – were allowed to suggest that women turned to denunciation of human trafficking in order to get financing for the journey back to their provinces (Abogada de las "Casitas" puso en duda la cantidad de rescate de mujeres por trata, *Tiempo Sur*, 11/11/2012).

In general, the topics refer to the postures in favour and against the possible reopening or moving of the brothels (Pedirán reunión con Cantín por posible reapertura de las Casitas, *Tiempo Sur*, 01/11/2012; Reapertura de las Casitas: "Repudio a la decisión judicial", *Tiempo Sur* 04/11/2012; Habrá otro pedido al procurador de la nación para que no reabran las Casitas, *Tiempo Sur* 04/11/2012).

For part of the provincial authorities, we can see a search for consensus, within the frame of the Public Audience Project (Peralta y Fadul coincidieron en opinión pública sobre "casitas", *Tiempo Sur*, 22/08/11).

But for the part of postulates to City Mayor and Councillor, a position is fixed regarding the posible reopening of Las Casitas, although talking about prostitution is avoided or calls to let down hypocrisy are made (Entre los candidatos hay consenso para que "Las Casitas" vuelvan a funcionar, *La Opinión Austral*, 6/07/2011). Within these declarations, prostitution is distinguished from human trafficking or sexual exploitation, depending if the news is focused on a search from the Human Trafficking Office or the Subsecretary for Women, or whether it refers to a police inspection or declarations from the legal representatives of the owners and women who exercise prostitution. In addition, the idea of control over health, security and the practices of sexual labour is reinforced.

3.3. Deepening of Abolitionism

This period begins with the modification of the Human Trafficking Act in 2012, which brings about a turning point for the definition and valuation of prostitution. Prostitution frequently appears associated with the crime of procuring, leading to understand that women are victims of that felony (procuring=prostitution) and new sources related to Human Rights, Women Rights or organisms dedicated to the fight against human trafficking, and official, political and institutional voices are notably diminished.

Therefore, the debate for the reopening also decreases, and references are made to national acts or legislation of a abolitionist/prohibitionist tenor, taking as a topic the prohibition of sexual offering, the derogation of the figure of Cabaret and the numerous instances of sensibilization and capacitation about human trafficking (Pedirán a concejales que derogen al ordenanza de cabaret clase "c", *Tiempo Sur*, 8/11/2012; "La prostitución de por sí no se podrá prohibir nunca", *Tiempo Sur*, 17/11/2012; Sensibilizan sobre Trata como "una modalidad extrema de violencia de género", *Tiempo Sur*, 26/11/2012).

Unlike the period before the shutdown of Las Casitas, media assume three posible cases of human trafficking after a search by the police in a private apartment denominated VIP during which three women are found, one of them being the owner (Procedimiento por posibles casos de trata de personas en Río Gallegos, *Tiempo Sur*, 18/04/2013). If during 2009 the accusations made by women were put in doubt, in this new context the presumption is that it is a case of human trafficking, even when it could have been a case of autonomous sexual labour. None of this kind of news have followups that account for the ongoing of the causes.

Definitions of prostitution are precluded by human trafficking or sexual exploitation. This fusion is not only observed in the source's own words but also in the information provided by the article, leading to understand that women who exercise prostitution are victims. For instance, a note referring to the verdict of the Appealing Chamber of Comodoro Rivadavia explains that it couldn't be proved that there was a felony of human trafficking or prostitution, implying the latter is a felony (La clausura de lupanares fue un "punto clave" a nivel nacional, *Tiempo Sur*, 6/6/2012) or they also refer to the struggle "against prostitution and human trafficking", as if human trafficking was necessarily a part of prostitution or implying that prostitution constitutes a crime without clarifying the limits between them (Subsecretaría e la Mujer espera aprobación de ley para pelear contra el proxenitismo, *Tiempo Sur*, 25/7/2012). Concretely, ever since the profundization of abolitionist politics, the media discourse denies the possibility of prostitution as a free exercise or as an autonomous activity of women, overlapping prostitution with human trafficking and centering the cover of women exclusively as victims of sexual exploitation.

If in the previous stage local authorities had began searching for consensus and maintaining ambiguous positions, during the boom of provincial abolitionism carried on by the Subsecretary for Women, they called themselves to silence. This is so to the point that there was no declaration issued after the verdict that resolved lifting the federal charges and allowing the reopening of Las Casitas (Aseguran que se debe cumplir con la orden judicial para la reapertura de los prostibulos, *Tiempo Sur*, 06/11/2012).

A paradigmatic example of this last stage are the declarations of the leader of the Frente para la Victoria party, the representative Rubén "La Burra" Contreras, in September 2013 during the session in which the provincial act against human trafficking was issued. The representative said that "there is a necessity for each one of us to have a distraction, to be in some moment with a woman. I think it is fundamental for a man's normal life in these places". These expressions suscitated an unanimous rejection of the three parties, including his own, against "his support of prostitution and despise for the condition of women". In addition, he was penally charged for apology for felony by a national representative, the ONG La Alameda and the organization Esclavitud Cero ("Repudio unánime a Contreras pero no se aceptó su exclusión de la legislatura", *Tiempo Sur*, 13/9/2013).

4. Discussion

In the light of our hypothesis, that correlates legal changes with cultural changes, the results indicate that legislation, as an imposed norm, propiciates discursive changes but not necessarily institutional ones. That is to say, a politically correct discourse is construed, but this does not affect cultural practices.

This happens especially at the beginning of the second stage, in which local legislation was precluded by a federal shutdown that was the application of an Act considered to be foreign in this region. That is to say, in the face of the provisional suspension dictated by traditional regulationism, the silence of certain media and periodistic sources and/or the search for consensus without daring to establish positions that were identified before the shutdown is significant. Subsequently, an hegemonic abolitionist discourse took the lead that condemned opinions in favour of organized prostitution. What is said in a mediatic context responds to legal changes and slowly generates social imaginaries in which people look for representations that give meaning to prostitution and its world.

The forms of denomination also change in correspondence with historic changes: prostitutes, women of the night, girls, "alternadoras", victims. But deep down, all of them share a common line between moral suspicion with a gender bias. Therefore, the first expressions are representations that consider prostitution as a free and autonomous activity and that distinguishes it from the classical construction of women as criminals. A gap between prostitution and sexual exploitation appears, that in some cases presents itself in a confuse manner and in others with a clear conceptual distinction.

It is noteworthy that this is the case, since the tendency is that

Popular culture, as much as scientific culture, hurry to psychologize – and to classify as psychological pathology – women that transgress boundaries of sexual, economic and geographic discrimination, whose stereotype is the prostitute and to sociologize – and to normalize sociologically – the men who impose and/or exploit such boundaries (such as prostitute's clients, the police, husbands and fathers) (Petherson, 1966: 31).

Definitions and valorations about prostitution "have been historically hegemonized by three fields – the moral-religious, the biomedical and the legal – and more recently by activism" (Justo von Lurzer, 2011: 137). This way, the currently predominant representations present women who exercise prostitution in one of two dominant figures: the *victim* and the *disruptive* (Id. 2011). In these representations there is a strong stigmatization that results of the rejection of prostitution for considering it a non-normative practice, especially since 2000, with the increase of the fight against human trafficking for sexual exploitation, led by abolitionist groups.

Hegemonic discourses about prostitution represent the "prostitute" as a criminal, a source of infection, immoral or victim (Infeld, 2009; Barrancos, 1999; Justo von Lurzer, 2008). Nonetheless, it is interesting to observe a different representation associated to the idea of "free prostitution". Linked to the latter, the construction of autonomy maintained by media in the first stage is parallel to the concern about hygiene. Like in discourses of the past^[6], women are charged again with the responsibility of health risks. And the state's activity is focused in control.

In addition, we can observe certain naivety, since this freedom of decision is demonstrated in a kind of objectivity associated to the idea of commerce. With this we refer to the objective of constructing an idea of "free prostitution" through denominations like "owner" or "entrepreneur", that are associated to the idea of "shopkeeper" and legal commerce. At the same time, women are represented under the denominations of "alternadoras" or "ladies of the night", stressing the night hours strip and the controversial activity of "alternating"^[7].

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have addressed the changes in the way media cover news about prostitution, specifically about Las Casitas and the felony of human trafficking, giving special attention to representations about prostitution and the topics set in motion. These differences can be seen in the ways in which women who exercise prostitution are named through the different kind of periodistic sources perused.

In general, periodistic sources define the tone of the news, although in the stage of major height of abolitionism, all press news that interviewed legal representatives of brothels kept some distance with the source's discourse.

News covering police searches had an important shift in the sources used because in the transition from one stage to another, special offices for the fight against human trafficking were created and the Subsecretary

for Women gained prominence replacing official sources (policemen), allowing for the topic of prostitution to move from Police sections to Society or Politics sections more frequently. It is with state and social organizations in defense of victims of human trafficking that prostitution starts to be defined as a modality of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Prostitution as a discursive object is configured not only by specific people that mention it but also by the historical frame in which discourses happen. In this sense, certain discourses that justified the existence of brothels were tolerated in a context in which these were considered as a gathering point for local entertainment. After 2012, these same discourses are repudiated as it is interpreted that these declarations maintain certain level of compliance with crimes like human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Additionally, this is complemented with a moral perspective from which the possibility of conceiving sexual labour as a choice for some women is precluded.

It is noteworthy that the debate covered by media around local prostitution is based on declarations of public servants and police sources as well as owners and legal representatives or social and state organizations that fight against human trafficking. Only in few occasions the source is the protagonist, be them victims or sexual workers. This situation repeats itself in both scenarios, when regulationist politics are predominant and when abolitionist/prohibitionist politics take the lead.

We would like to continue the line of analysis of discursive changes in different scenarios related to thresholds, that is to say, what is possible to represent depending on the historical matrix. The elements articulated around prostitution vary in their meaning according to the context in which this articulation takes place. For example, in certain moments prostitution can be associated to "health control" or "working women" according to the historical matrix that precedes this threshold, characterized by a strong reglementarist tradition.

Subsequently, when modifications appear in the next historical matrix, the same elements that appeared to be important in the previous horizon, lose viability and capacity of representation at present because the articulation only allows to represent women as victims of prostitution.

The results exposed constitute a transcendental element for a genealogical reconstruction of knowledges and practices around prostitution for the last decade in Rio Gallegos as a peripheral-southern space of the national territory.

The institutional transition from reglementarism to abolitionism is reflected on the mediatic discourse through the representations of prostitution, of women that exercise prostitution and of topics and tendencies that guided each press article. This transition gave form to discursive changes in different contexts – including media – and shows how thresholds of prostitution are redefined.

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Notas

1. The PhD investigation is titled "Prostitution, prostitutes and brothel spaces. Struggling knowledges, practices and imaginaries" and it's general objective is the reconstruction of a genealogy of knowledges, practices and public actions around prostitution in Rio Gallegos (south of Argentina) between 1912 and 2012.

2. An entertainment place to wich people attend to dance in night hours. In other spanish-speaking countries it is also known as *discoteca*.

3. There's an investigation for the period 1896-1912 by Esther Anchuvidart et al (2005) and also by historian horacio Lafuente (1996) restrigned to the period 1912-1937.

4. In the early works of Foucault, belonging to the proposition of the archeological method, "event" appears in a negative way as a facade for a net of discourses, powers, strategies and practices. In a second moment, the term appears in a positive way as a cristalization of complex historical determinations that Foucault opposes to the idea of structure, as the irruption of an historical singularity.

5. In November 2012 the provincial Subsecretary for Women introduced a proyect to derogate the figure of the Cabaret in the House of Representatives. These were places allowed by Rio Gallegos Township as commercial establishments for night entertainment.

6. We refer here to discourses from the begining of the XXth Century analyzed in the PhD investigation.

7. One of the definitions that appears in the Real Academia Española about "alternar" refers to distributing something between people or things that take turns succesively, but in this context, the notion refers to women who deal with customers and stimulate the buying of drinks. The "alternadoras" appear in many local decrees, but their function is not clarified. For example, in the local decree for night entertainment spaces, the acces of underaged adolescents is

prohibited in "activities authorised for erotic spectacles or where the operation of people hired for "alternar" or dancing with the customers and establishments specified in the following sections (...) g) Night Clubs; t) Whiskerías; u) Cabarets".



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