

## **PROSTITUTION IN COSTA RICA: PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS IN SAN JOSE AND PUNTARENAS VS. REALITY**

*Elizabeth Izaguirre, St. Olaf College*  
*Advisor: Andrea Anfossi*

Prostitution is an age-old line of work that has been historically condemned and yet continually practiced. Each country has its own laws to regulate or prohibit prostitution, depending on the various opinions and perceptions lawmakers and civilians have towards the work. In Costa Rica, prostitution is neither legal nor illegal making the subject all the more taboo. This causes stereotypes about the job that may or may not be true. In order to recognize the discordance between perceptions and reality, a total of 200 questionnaires were distributed to college students and 4 interviews were conducted with sex workers and experts in San Jose city and the town of Puntarenas.

All statistical tests, including Contingency Tables and parametric one-way ANOVAs to test strength of dependencies and differences in mean, were carried out with Statgraphics Centurion XV Ver. 15. Most closed-answer questions had a majority response, indicating a common stereotype or perception. Responses between sex workers and students seemed to match on most questions, and differed on some questions emphasizing the more negative aspects of the job. There were differences in mean responses to some questions based on certain demographics such as gender, religion, major, scholarships received, and where the student grew up. Sex workers presented themselves as autonomous beings just like anyone else in the workforce, while the experts did so as well but tended to point out the social inequalities usually leading people to choose this job. Mostly everyone was able to distinguish between prostitution and human trafficking or slavery.

The overall perceptions of students were not far off from the reality of life in prostitution according to the sex workers interviewed. People in prostitution are societally condemned for what they do, even though most people are able to recognize the choice is more of an act of subsistence. All interviews revealed that with more education and opportunities, there would be less people choosing prostitution. However, it is important to recognize their choice of work as valid as any other for their safety and well-being.