

## Chapter 6.

# Talking about prostitution and the representation of a (problematic) group: Identifying frames in Flemish news coverage on prostitution

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2006, the television show “Matroesjka’s” made its way into numerous Flemish living rooms. For two seasons, the audience was presented a story about Belgian men tricking Eastern European women into prostitution, lured by the promise that they would be employed as dancers. What follows is a story about trafficking, rape, sexism, mafia, drugs and violence. Although popular understandings of prostitution lean towards this image, scholars and activists are involved in an intense – and divisive – debate on the nature of prostitution and whether, why or how it is a social problem (Weitzer, 2007). Academic research on the topic has not yet been endorsed on a large scale, meaning that there is plenty of room for subjective interpretation of the fragmented information that is available. The ways in which prostitution is represented or *framed* by political or social movements and organizations, is steered by beliefs regarding issues such as the motivations of women to sell sexual services, and the consequences this has on these women as well as on society as a whole. A *prostitution frame* in this sense refers to a generalized understanding and perception of the issue of prostitution.

It is important to be aware of how prostitution is framed because of its far-reaching real-world consequences. It affects how people who work in prostitution are treated by society on a daily basis, but also the conditions in which they work and the extent to which they – or their clients – become stigmatized and criminalized. Furthermore, dominant frames regarding prostitution have been found to inform the political debates at the state and supranational level (Outshoorn, 2005). Especially frames that associate prostitution – *the exchange of sexual services for money or other material benefits* – with human trafficking – *recruiting and transporting men and women across national borders for work or services by means of violence, threat, abuse of authority or other forms of coercion* – influence current evolutions in prostitution policies (Kantola & Squires, 2004; Outshoorn, 2012a).

The media play an important role in constructing and spreading frames on prostitution to a broad audience (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, Benoit, & Walby, 2008). For example, in the Netherlands the media have played an important role in inciting a “moral panic” regarding the existence of “loverboys”, young

men who seduce young girls and subsequently push them into prostitution (Bovenkerk & van San, 2011). The sensationalist focus by the media on the most obscure and problematic aspects of prostitution such as trafficking, has also been said to have stimulated the political agenda setting of revising the legalization of sex work in the Netherlands (Outshoorn, 2012a). Research in the UK in its turn has concluded that the stereotypical and one-sided framing by the media of street sex workers as “antisocial” further complicates the relationships between sex workers and the residents of the communities in which they operate (O’Neill, Campbell, Hubbard, Pitcher, & Scoular, 2008). This illustrates that media framing is a powerful tool and hence the importance of standing still with this issue.

The present chapter explores how prostitution has been framed in the television news in Belgium over the past decade. First, based on the research literature, three relevant prostitution frames are distinguished and described further in depth. Second, the results of the framing analysis are presented together with an interpretation of these results in the light of the prostitution frames as described in the first section. Finally the chapter concludes with a general discussion of the results in the light of policy making, together with a discussion of the limitations of the current study and future opportunities for a better understanding of the issue.

## 2. ON FRAMES AND POLICY

Overall, intolerant attitudes towards prostitutes are rooted in western culture, ranging, for example, from the fear of moral degradation to the fear of the spread of venereal disease (Sanders, O’Neill, & Pitcher, 2009). There have been historical shifts, however, in the reasoning or motivations that underlie this intolerance and the foci in prostitution policy. In what follows, we distinguish between three prostitution frames: the “social/moral order frame”, the “oppression/sexual domination frame”, and the “pro rights/sex work frame”. This distinction is not absolute and it should be kept in mind that there are other ways of differentiating between prostitution frames. The decision for distinguishing between these three frames is based on recurring emphases that are found in the academic literature with reference to prostitution in contemporary western society, in combination with opposing images that are constructed of the women who work in prostitution. The social/moral order frame in essence depicts the prostitute as a *deviant* against who society needs to be protected, while the oppression/sexual domination frame presents the prostitute as a *victim* who needs to be protected against society (or more specifically against men in society). In contrast to this, the pro rights/sex work frame does not problematize prostitution in itself but rather the conditions under which women who sell sex have to work and the prostitute is depicted as a *decision-maker*. After a discussion of these three frames, some general problems that arise with these

frames are pointed out. The instrumental value and power of these frames will also be illustrated by giving concrete examples of how they have been “functional” in underpinning prostitution policy across Europe.

To guide the description of the frames and of the problems that arise, we use four parameters of framing, as they are distinguished by Entman (1993), namely: a *problem* is defined in a certain way, the *causes* of the problem are identified, a *moral judgment* is made on the actors involved, and *remedies* are proposed.

## 2.1. The social/moral order frame

In the social/moral order frame, prostitution is presented as a *problem* for having disorganizing or destabilizing effects on society. On the one hand their assumed entrenchment with the criminal underworld and, on the other hand, the public nuisances they cause are seen as *causes* for decreasing community cohesion and perceived safety (Scoular & O’Neill, 2007). The changing landscape of prostitution with the influx of migrant women especially from Eastern Europe increases feelings of anxiety, as prostitutes become seen as the “visible part of a threatening criminal underworld” (Mathieu, 2012, p. 206). Street prostitution is especially regarded as highly destructive for the community. The presence of the prostitute is not only an affront to the public morality; prostitutes are also associated with antisocial behavior and drugs. In addition to this, they attract clients who cause further disturbances such as noise, increased traffic and harassment of residents (Kantola & Squires, 2004).

The *moral judgment* attached to prostitutes becomes one of deviant women to whom a range of problems are attributed. This judgment lays the basis for the “whore stigma” referring to the negative images of sex workers *because* they break social norms of appropriate behavior (Sanders, 2005) and they become scapegoated for an array of societal problems related to prostitution (Sanders, 2009). In addition to the individual sex worker, the underground prostitution networks are also held responsible for the criminality involved, although these networks are only visible to the public through the presence of the prostitute herself.

Within this frame, the *remedies* proposed range from regulation to eradication, depending on how inherently problematic prostitution is believed to be. It is important that, if its very existence is tolerated, at least its visibility in the city is lowered (Hubbard, 2002). Prostitutes should especially be prevented from intruding the more “respectable” spaces and gentrification and city development are important mechanisms in explaining where street prostitution is tolerated and where it becomes a problem (Hubbard & Prior, 2012).

## 2.2. The oppression/sexual domination frame

In the “oppression/sexual domination” frame, prostitution is a *problem* because it is seen as enforced upon women. This frame considers prostitution as inherently problematic but rather than a deviant, the sex worker is believed to be a victim who is abused and exploited by men (Weitzer, 2010). According to this frame, no woman can willingly choose to sell her sexual services and she is always forced, coerced or lured into it (Outshoorn, 2005). From this perspective, prostitution is per definition harmful and traumatizing regardless of the context in which it takes place. The exchange of sex for money is seen as an act of violence, in the first place against the prostitute but by extension to all women in society because of the endorsement of patriarchal suppression that it represents (Barry, 1979, 1995; Jeffries, 1997). On the *causal* side, this frame mainly focuses on the demand side of prostitution and especially on men who purchase sexual services. It is institutionalized sexism in a patriarchal society which allows that sexual services can be bought by men from women. To provide to the demand side, pimps, brothel keepers and human traffickers trick, deceit or force women into prostitution, thereby targeting at the most vulnerable women. The aforementioned changing landscape of prostitution with an influx of migrant women is also relevant for understanding why this frame gained importance, as it offered opportunities for equating prostitution with trafficking and “modern slavery” (Mathieu, 2012; Spanger, 2011).

The *moral judgment* in the oppression/sexual domination frame is clear: buying sexual services is wrong. Since no woman can actively choose to work as a prostitute, the oppression/sexual domination frame refrains from using the term “prostitute”. This frame makes use of words such as “prostituted women”, “victims” or “survivors” to emphasize that prostitution is something that is “done” to women as opposed to a voluntary practice (Weitzer, 2010). This frame refrains from ascribing agency to women who work in prostitution, explaining that those prostituted women that do claim to choose for prostitution are traumatized. The finding that women who work in prostitution tend to come from more troubled social backgrounds as compared to a general cross-section of women in society (Stoltz et al., 2007; Kramer & Berg, 2003), is used as a support for this trauma-claim. Additionally, this type of frame also develops a moral judgment against male sexuality, considering it as potentially dangerous. Men paying for sex are represented as sexual predators who sexually violate women (Outshoorn, 2005; Weitzer, 2007).

In the oppression/sexual domination frame a clear *remedy* is advised: the sex trade in its entirety should be eradicated. Legalization is no option since it would only legally confirm and sustain violence against women. All those benefiting from the sexual exploitation such as clients, pimps and brothel

keepers, should be punished. “Prostituted women” should be helped out of prostitution and guided towards a prostitution-free life (Outshoorn, 2005).

### 2.3. The pro rights/sex work frame

Contrary to abolitionists, pro rights activists do not problematize the act of prostitution in itself but believe that the context around prostitution is *problematic* (Outshoorn, 2005). While exchanging sexual services for money is not problematic, the labor conditions often are. These labor conditions are often underground or permeated by criminal stakeholders. While working together in indoor venues offers more opportunities for sex workers to protect themselves and each other against violent clients, socio-legal barriers may prevent such cooperation (Krüsi et al., 2012; Sanders, 2004a). Within this frame, the lack of recognition of prostitution as a legitimate way of earning money, and the silencing of the voices of sex workers who are labeled as either “deviants” or “victims”, is believed to be *causal* to the challenges sex workers face. Underlying most of the difficulties for sex workers is the persisting stigmatization and denigration of women who sell sexual services (Scoular, 2004).

Within this frame, it is difficult to distinguish a *moral judgment* on the actors involved in the problem. There are, however, clear representations about women who choose to work in prostitution. The pro rights/sex work frame takes a liberal feminist stance on prostitution, whereby it is proclaimed that sex workers should have the right to control their own body and should be free to use it for sex work in order to provide themselves with an income (Agustín, 2006). Sex work is regarded as a legitimate economic survival strategy, as it may offer stability and security to women in deprived social conditions (Rosen & Venkatesh, 2008). In addition to pure survival, this frame also represents sex work as a possible advancement strategy, as a stepping-stone to a life with better opportunities (Saunders, 2005). Thereby the distinction between voluntarism and coercion is crucial because such agency self-evidently only applies to voluntary sex work. The term “sex work” is thus not applicable to those situations which involve exploitation, abuse and trafficking of people (Hardy, Kingston & Sanders, 2010). Furthermore, the distinction between “rational choice” and “free choice” is clarifying: a woman entering the sex industry may make a “rational choice” while this is not necessarily a “free choice” given the constraints she lives in (Chapkis, 1997).

According to this frame, *remedies* to the problems sex workers face lie in the regulation and recognition of prostitution as a legitimate work. Sex workers should be provided with the same legal and political rights as other citizens (Miller & Haltiwanger, 2004). Furthermore this perspective calls for the recognition and validation of the choices that women make when confronted with limited economic opportunities (Scoular, 2004).

## 2.4. General problems

In general, all the frames lack systematic supporting knowledge from women's experiences working in prostitution. Systematic information on the pull and push factors leading women but also men and transgenders to prostitution remains needed. Furthermore, the voice of sex workers or those who were forced into prostitution are greatly absent in most research projects on prostitution.

Concerning the *representation of the problem and causes to the problem*, the social/moral order frame mainly focuses on the most problematic and visible parts of prostitution, namely street prostitution and "survival prostitution" (i.e. women who sell sex in order to maintain their drug addiction). While violence and crime are part of the everyday reality of women who sell sex on the streets, this is not in the first place committed by street sex workers themselves. Rather they fall victim to clients, but also members of the community and the police (Sanders, 2004b). In addition, the associations that are made between sex work, drugs and other forms of criminality are by far not universal for the industry and important differences are found between on-street and off-street sex work (Sanders, O'Neill & Pitcher, 2009). The oppression/sexual domination frame in its turn is criticized for being too ideologically colored in defining the problem of prostitution and for relying on strongly biased empirical work (Weitzer, 2013). Within this frame, there is no room for diverging experiences from prostitutes and clients. By considering all prostitution as sexual slavery, this frame also represents prostitution and sex trafficking as two sides of the same coin. This association is criticized for leading to a further marginalization of women working in prostitution and complicating local prostitution debates (Outshoorn, 2001; Petersen, 2001; Kantola & Squires, 2004; Carson & Edwards, 2011). It also leads to a lack of understanding of why women migrate for sex work, of the complexity of these experiences as well as of the challenges these women face (O'Brien, Carpenter & Hayes, 2013; Agustín, 2006).

The *moral judgment* inherent to the three frames can also be problematic in numerous respects. By depicting her as deviant or traumatized, both the social/moral order frame and the oppression/sexual domination de-rationalize the prostitute. Her ability to act as rational and moral agent become questioned and as such she becomes further excluded and stigmatized (O'Connell Davidson, 2006; Bjønnes, 2012). The oppression/sexual domination frame also develops a strong moral judgment towards men buying sexual services. By depicting men as sexual predators, supporters of this frame target clients for violating women's human rights. This moral judgment is problematic since it also stigmatizes males and male sexuality while not acknowledging that there is a knowledge gap on why men buy sexual services and how they interact with prostitutes (Weitzer, 2013). Studies specifically focusing on male customers do point out that men who pay for sex are

not that different from men who do not pay for sex in terms of social characteristics. They are mainly motivated by the need of sexual relief as well as the need for engagement with another person, and the ease of the sexual transaction (Pitts, Smith, Grierson, O'Brien, & Misson, 2004). Although the pro rights/sex work frame, more than the other frames, opens up for the different ways by which women can enter or stay in prostitution, adherents of this frame are also criticized for focusing too much on the independence of sex workers. The more implicit moral judgment on the independence of sex workers leads to the critique that this frame does not critically analyze the social, economic and political inequalities that often emerge between clients and sex workers. Furthermore, it does not explain why mainly men buy sex from (mainly) women (Outshoorn, 2001).

Lastly, the three frames can all be criticized for the *remedies/solutions* they propose. The focus on prostitution as a nuisance and disturbance to local communities has led numerous cities to ban (street) prostitution from city centers, away from the public eye. The exclusion of especially street prostitutes from city centers is criticized for leading prostitution to more underground spaces such as industrial, deserted areas or off-street places such as bars or apartments. The lack of social control in such spaces is said to create a more dangerous working environment for prostitutes and more difficult for outreach workers to connect with them (Harcourt et al., 2010). The focus on diminishing the nuisances caused by prostitution has also led to prostitution laws being enforced differentially depending on geographical location, with a more severe repression in the more upscale and gentrified areas (Levy & Jakobsson, 2013). Policies that aim to abolish prostitution can be criticized for neglecting the dynamic between the supply and demand side of sex work, with a one-sided focus on the demand side in the oppression/sexual domination frame. The criminalization of the purchase of sex is said not to eradicate prostitution but rather to push it underground (Kilvingston, Day, & Ward, 2001). The pro rights/sex work frame represents legalization as the best remedy against the problematic context surrounding sex workers. Additionally, legalization would also make abuses and violations in the industry less frequent. However, there are different ways of legalizing prostitution and more research is needed to discover what exactly leads to the most beneficial situation for all the parties involved. Importantly, because of stigmatization, women working in prostitution might be reluctant to be "incorporated into civil society as a 'sex worker', even if this was an option for them" (Kilvingston et al., 2001). From this it is clear that more research is needed about the specificities or complexity of prostitution and the demands from those working in prostitution. However, only adherents from the pro rights/sex work frame recognize the necessity of such information.

## 2.5. Relevance in current policy debates, illustrations

Although we discussed the frames as three distinct entities, in reality frames can overlap within activities, analyses, or strategic alliances (Kempadoo, 2012). Rooted in their overlapping goals in terms of reducing or eliminating prostitution, the social/moral order and the oppression/sexual domination frame have become “unlikely allies” in their striving for anti-prostitution policy implementation (Outshoorn, 2005; Weitzer, 2006). This has led to a confusing “going together” of the framing of the prostitute as a deviant who disrupts social order as well as a victim of men and traffickers (Doezema, 2010). As Levy and Jakobsson put it (2013), “constructions of sex workers as passive victims lacking agency and self-determination are, it seems, not mutually exclusive from a construction of them as an immoral and deviant nuisance” (Levy & Jakobsson, 2013, p. 338). This becomes particularly clear regarding the migrant sex worker, who has played a central role in policy debates in several European countries, and who has thereby been framed as an illegal worker who undermines the fabric of the welfare state while at the same time being conceived as a victim of the international sex trade (Outshoorn, 2012b).

Prostitution policies can be connected with specific frames but equally they can borrow different elements from different frames. *The social/moral order frame* is especially recognizable at the level of communities or cities where public nuisance is felt more directly. For example, this frame is currently popular in Brussels where public nuisance leads a local committee to develop campaigns against the presence of street prostitution around schools, theatres or residential areas in general. In the UK such neighborhood committees have been particularly active and the reduction of public nuisances has been a major aspect of the prostitution laws implemented in the UK over the past years, such as anti-solicitation and kerb-crawling laws (West, 2000; Sanders, 2009; Kantola & Squires, 2004) and restrictions on the advertisement for sex work in telephone booths (Hubbard, 2002). Loopmans and Van Den Broeck (2011) illustrate, however, how residents in a prostitution area can also combine arguments from a social/moral order frame (focusing on public nuisance and crime caused by prostitution) with elements from an oppression/sexual domination frame (focusing on exploitation of prostitutes) or even elements from a pro rights/sex work frame (focusing on the need for a better environment for prostitutes). Research from the UK shows that such more varied and nuanced opinions are easily overshadowed by the – louder – anti-prostitution voices, ultimately leading to a misrepresentation of the opinions in the community in which sex work occurs (Sagar & Jones, 2012).

*The oppression/sexual domination frame* has successfully influenced the policy debates in Scandinavian countries, where sex workers are primarily conceived as victims and according policy models have been implemented

which criminalize the purchase of sexual services (Bjønnnes, 2012). Sweden was the first country that criminalized the purchase of sex and by doing so intended to provide a “model of good practice”, which could then be copied by other countries. Norway, Iceland and France have effectively followed in Sweden’s footsteps, and the adoption of a similar policy has been debated in the UK and Denmark. Most recently, European parliament has on 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2014 passed a non-binding resolution which states that countries should criminalize the purchase of sexual services. The oppression/sexual domination frame can be considered a powerful frame with regard to (international) policy making on prostitution (O’Brien, Carpenter, & Hayes, 2013). International organizations such as the European Women’s Lobby or the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women use this frame to lobby for the abolition of prostitution and can thereby fall back on powerful alliances with the more traditional political parties. An analysis of the prostitution policy making in France led to the conclusion that “the close links that the older feminists share with anti-globalization organizations and parties of the left [...] explain their success in pleading for an abolitionist point of view within this part of the political field” (Mathieu, 2012, p. 205).

While a policy can be inspired by a particular frame it is equally important, however, to consider what happens after a law has been passed as well. The social intervention pillar of the law in Sweden, which was aimed at helping people out of prostitution, has not been put in place and as such the backbone of the law has never been realized (Florin, 2012). Also the actual penalizing of the purchase of sex is not executed in a consistent way. In Sweden as well as in Norway, it is found that the policing and execution of this law is selectively applied to target “public prostitution” and thus to “cleanse the public space” (Levy & Jakobsson, 2013). Also an in-depth analysis of the French prostitution policy suggests that laws which are passed under the flag of compassion become in fact a tool for removing migrant sex workers from the country (Mathieu, 2012).

The *pro rights/sex work frame* has been particularly successful in influencing the policy making in the Netherlands, and outside Europe in some Australian states and New Zealand (West, 2000). Although more recently, more restrictions and regulations have been implemented in the Netherlands as well (Outshoorn, 2012a). In Germany, a new prostitution law in 2002 extended labor rights to prostitutes who since then could register and fall back on social and legal protection. However, the implementation of the law has been difficult and only few sex workers have actually registered as a sex worker. As a consequence, this law has had little impact so far (Pates, 2012). The *pro rights/sex work frame* is used by international sex workers’ rights movements, such as the International Prostitutes Collective, the Sex Workers Outreach Project, or – in Belgium – Espace P.

### 3. FRAMING PROSTITUTION IN THE FLEMISH MEDIA

This section discusses how prostitution has been framed in the Belgian television news over the past decade with a limitation to the Flemish news coverage on the topic (referring to Flanders – the northern, Dutch speaking region of Belgium). First, the data that were used are described together with a description of how the analyses were performed. Next, the results are presented. The section concludes with the linking of the results to the frames on prostitution as described above.

#### 3.1. Data and method

Our analysis is based on a dataset containing the news reporting from the two major television channels in Belgium (which are the only two channels with their own news service), namely the public channel *één* and the commercial channel *VTM*.

The relevant fragments were selected from the News Archive of the Media Policy Research Center (Steunpuntmedia), which contains all the news fragments from the two main news shows over the last 10 years, starting in 2003. The fragments were coded independently from this study. A broad range of codes were available<sup>1</sup> yet there was no single code specifically referring to prostitution. In order to detect fragments related to prostitution issues, we selected fragments that were filed under the codes: “criminality” and “social affairs”. We narrowed down the selection by looking at the fragments under the sub-codes: “human trafficking” and “sexual affairs”. We like to point out that by relying on an independent coding system, it is difficult to assess the inter-rater reliability of the codes used. Furthermore, there might be news fragments about prostitution that were not coded as such. As a consequence we might have missed certain contents that were relevant. From January 2003 until June 2014, we identified 36 news fragments that mentioned prostitution. Four fragments were excluded from the analyses because they did not match our topic of interest. Two of these fragments referred to child sexual abuse and another two referred to the presentation of a new coordinated action against human trafficking (including in the fields of household labor, restaurants and construction).

For our analysis of the news contents we departed from the same four parameters as defined by Entman (1993) and which were also used for describing the prostitution frames above (namely, the definition of a problem, the identification of its causes, a judgment on the actors involved, and the presentation of a remedy). In addition, specific attention went to the images that were used in the news fragments and to the identification of the agents

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1 For more information on the different codes: [Steunpuntmedia.be](http://Steunpuntmedia.be)

who were given the opportunity to talk on screen. As argued by Druckman (2001), “frames of communication” in terms of the images, words, presentations used may play an important role in shaping “frames of thought” in terms of the understanding of the situation (such as the prostitution frames described above).

## 3.2. Results

For the discussion of the results, emphasis goes to the news fragments covering events, which took place in Belgium. Regarding the reporting on events occurring in Belgium, two main themes recurred. A first theme referred to prostitution in neighborhoods (covering ten news fragments) and a second theme referred to criminal prostitution networks and trafficking (covering eight news fragments). The remaining fragments could not be clearly organized into specific themes and are thus referred to as “other fragments” (covering fourteen news fragments). In this latter category, news coverage of events from abroad is also briefly discussed.

### 3.2.1. Prostitution in neighbourhoods

#### 3.2.1.1. *Definition of the problem, its causes, and the agents involved*

Ten news fragments covered prostitution as a problem for the neighborhood in which it occurred. Thereby the focus went to the most visible form of prostitution, street prostitution, and the prostitutes themselves were seen as the main cause of the problem. The problem itself referred to the direct nuisance prostitution caused to the residents and to its perceived inappropriateness in the particular part of the city.

First, the nuisance these women caused referred to their – sometimes perceived as aggressive – solicitation of clients. These women were seen by the residents as unreasonable and difficult to deal with, which was exacerbated by the fact that many of them were perceived to use hard drugs. When referring to these women in the news by the news presenter, words such as “whores” and “heroine whores” were used. Also, the fact that most of the women referred to were immigrants was seen as part of the problem, as this made it more difficult to “deal” with them. Explicit reference was made to “Eastern Europe” as a main region of origin of these women, and the term “illegal prostitutes” was used. Regardless of concrete events, the very presence of foreign prostitutes on the street was believed to increase feelings of unsafety among citizens.

In addition to the prostitutes themselves, their clients were also seen as part of the problem. Clients who are looking for a “suitable” woman cause annoyances when driving by in their cars, slowing down, and causing obstructions and noise. This problem extended to the neighborhoods around window prostitution and “rendez-vous houses”, hotels where street prostitutes

take their clients to. In addition to their physical presence in the neighborhood, clients of prostitutes became an annoyance when they not only approached prostitutes but also approached women who were not a prostitute and who as a consequence felt harassed. A particular problem arose with French clients who, due to a more strict prostitution law in France, come to Belgium for prostitution. These French clients were found to cause more nuisance in prostitution areas and they were also more involved in criminal activities such as car theft. To a lesser extent, the reference was also made to “pimps” as a cause of nuisance (their presumed presence), although this was not in the focus.

Second, the presence of prostitutes in certain areas was also seen as a problem because of its inappropriateness in terms of moral decency. The presence of street prostitutes, especially those that use drugs, would leave a negative impression on people from outside who come to that part of the city. Being unwillingly confronted with prostitution would also be mentally disturbing to people. This was especially problematic in Antwerp where street prostitutes operated in the vicinity of an elementary school. In Brussels, the focus went to the presence of street prostitution in neighborhoods that are lively and where cultural activities take place.

### *3.2.1.2. Solutions proposed*

The solutions that were offered to solve the neighborhood nuisances caused by prostitution focused on “getting rid of the prostitutes”. Thereby the existence of “tolerance zones” in the city was seen as part of the reason why it would be feasible to exclude prostitutes from certain areas. However, it was also considered particularly difficult to relocate street prostitutes as they keep coming back to the same places. Therefore, it was suggested that the existing laws would be applied more strictly to them. Another solution was to move the focus onto the demand side, on the prostitutes’ clients, by punishing them when purchasing sexual services from street prostitutes. This “solution” received particular attention in several of the news fragments, as it also became implemented. The repression of the clients referred to intruding on their privacy by sending them a fine with a detailed description of their “offence” to their home address, which was expected to have a discouraging effect.

Another specific solution that was mentioned referred to the rendez-vous hotels where many of the sexual transactions take place. By imposing a specific tax on each room, the hotels would be discouraged to profile themselves as rendez-vous hotels. This “solution” would also give extra tax income to the city council.

With regard to illegal prostitutes, report was made of the arrest and deportation of some of these women who caused public disturbances. It was thereby not clear to what extent this was seen as a blueprint for future

strategies for dealing with the problem. In a different news fragment it was proposed that “the arrival of prostitutes from Eastern Europe should be stopped”. Only one fragment made reference to the precarious circumstances these women live in and the need for a more global approach, which would include giving these women legal documents so that they could find a different job.

### *3.2.1.3. Images and narratives*

The images that assisted the news presenter when reporting on the issues described above referred in the first place to images of the neighborhoods involved and images of female prostitutes who were standing on the side of the street (and who were in fact filmed against their will). Also more typical images of window prostitution were shown. Two news fragments covered images of the police who performed controls on (French) clients or who patrolled the streets. These images were used to give the viewer an idea of the general atmosphere in the neighborhoods where prostitution was believed to cause problems.

The people who came on screen and who were interviewed were mainly residents from the neighborhoods, lawmakers and to a lesser extent law enforcers. First, neighborhood residents confirmed the nuisances they experienced and the difficulties of “getting rid” of the prostitutes operating in their neighborhood. They described the prostitutes as “difficult to deal with” and expressed little faith that the problem would soon be resolved. Second, the lawmakers – specifically the mayor and council members – were given the opportunity to explain how they were going to handle the problem, where the focus went to targeting the clients. The federal minister of internal affairs also appeared on screen when the problem referred to disturbances caused by foreign (French) clients.

Although images of prostitutes were elaborately shown for the aim of illustrating the problem, this did not imply that they were also given a voice in the news fragments. In none of these news fragments a prostitute was interviewed. The position of prostitutes was somehow represented in two fragments. One was a fragment in which a social worker explained the precarious conditions in which (illegal) prostitutes needed to work while at the same time having to take care of family members. Another fragment was one in which the owner of a rendez-vous hotel was given a word and who mentioned that closing rendez-vous hotels would make it more difficult for prostitutes to work in a safe environment.

### 3.2.2. Prostitution networks and trafficking

#### 3.2.2.1. *Definition of the problem, its causes, and the agents involved*

In eight news fragments, prostitution was identified as an activity of criminal networks who lure women from abroad into prostitution and who exploit these women in Belgium. The main agents involved referred to the people who organize these networks, traffickers, and the women who fell victim of these traffickers. The networks mainly originated from Eastern Europe and explicit reference was made to the former Soviet Union, Georgia, Russia, Bulgaria, and Romania. The networks were labeled as “mafia” and were considered as well organized and dangerous. Furthermore, they were also involved in other criminal activities such as larceny and money laundering. One exception to this was a case where Belgian man was found responsible for bringing girls from Nigeria to Belgium, with the help of his Nigerian wife.

The problem with these prostitution networks not only referred to the victimization of trafficked women, but also to the negative effect this had on the Belgian prostitution industry. The exploitation of trafficked girls in brothels and bars was seen as creating unequal competition for Belgian brothels and bars. Another problem was that these “exploiters” did not pay taxes to the same extent as the Belgian bars did.

#### 3.2.2.2. *Solutions proposed*

The news fragments on prostitution networks focused on the reporting of police actions rather than on the reporting of possible solutions. For example, police actions were reported where those believed to be key figures were arrested. If solutions were mentioned, this referred to “tackling the problem at the root” because of the wide tentacles of these networks, comparable to the structure of the mafia. The networks need to be identified and only large scale coordinated actions, preferably international, can tackle the problem.

One news fragment reported on the discovery of trafficked girls in brothels. However, in the course of the fragment these trafficked girls became labeled as “illegal” and were therefore deported to their country of origin. It was not clear to what extent this was seen as a possible “solution” for the problem of trafficking and the dismantling of prostitution networks in general.

#### 3.2.2.3. *Images and narratives*

The images that were shown mainly referred to window prostitution and sex bars (brothels), but also footage of Eastern European cities. Images of Bulgaria and Russia were shown (with famous buildings and squares including young people on the background). Lawmakers and law enforcers especially came on screen as they were interviewed on the actions that were

undertaken. They presented the problem of the prostitution networks and the difficulties in tackling them.

Also people from non-governmental organizations came on screen. As such the director of the “Center for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism” and the director of “Payoke”, a refuge for prostitutes and victims of trafficking, were interviewed. They both focused on the needs of those women who had fallen victim to traffickers.

### 3.2.3. Other fragments related to prostitution

One category consisted of news fragments related to prostitution networks and trafficking but with reports from abroad. Two news fragments referred to the discovery of prostitution networks in the US and Spain, where it was not mentioned from which countries the presumed traffickers and victims originated. The women who had fallen victim to traffickers were presented as young vulnerable women coming from countries with limited access to financial resources and opportunities. One news fragment on prostitution networks and trafficking was from a different kind in that it covered the situation of women in South Africa in the context of the Football World Cup taking place there. With the arrival of huge amounts of tourists, traffickers saw opportunities for convincing women from the neighboring countries to come to work in South Africa. Some of these women were interviewed, and they explained that they were promised safer and cleaner working conditions in bars (clearly for selling sexual services) but upon arrival they found out that they had to work in harsher conditions on the streets.

Another category of foreign news related to important people getting involved in prostitution, which had a high sensationalist value. Six fragments reported on such cases which involved Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who was linked with sex parties, Howard Gutman, who was accused of engaging in sexual activities with male prostitutes while he was still the US ambassador in Brussels, and Italian prince Victor Emmanuel of Savoy, who was accused of being involved in a criminal network which was among other things active in the prostitution industry. In these fragments, the focus went to the important person involved rather than to the issue of prostitution itself. In the fragment referring to Howard Gutman, attention went also to the broader issue of male prostitution and a representative of “Alias”, an organization that works with male prostitutes, was given screen time to frame the situation of male prostitutes.

Two news fragments related to a bill by the liberal political party which would create a legal framework for prostitution and in which sex work would be treated as a regular type of work. In one news fragment an ex-prostitute was interviewed who explained that the creating of a social and legal frame would improve the situation of prostitutes. In another fragment

a female brothel keeper was interviewed who expressed her support for the bill.

Finally, some various news fragments referred to prostitution. One fragment reported on students selling sex for money, with fragments of an interview with a student sex worker (made anonymous). Thereby neither a specific problem nor a solution was mentioned but it was rather informative (informing on the fact that student sex work exists). One fragment referred to a woman who was found murdered and who might have been a prostitute given that she was found on the street wearing scanty clothes. The police was further investigating the case. A final fragment referred to plans for the gentrification of a neighborhood in Antwerp, which used to be a (window) prostitution area but which was made prostitution-free and which needed to attract new residents for becoming more lively again.

### **3.3. Conclusion in the light of prostitution frames**

The ways in which prostitution was framed by the Flemish news media contained several elements of a moral/social order frame. First, prostitution was considered a problem when it occurred in places where it was “inappropriate” (such as in residential areas, around schools and places frequented by visitors) or when it caused disturbances to the residents. In those cases prostitution in itself was not regarded a problem but it was a problem because of its location, its visibility and the nuisances it caused (whereby not only the prostitutes but also the clients were seen as a source of disturbance). Residents as well as lawmakers explicitly mentioned that prostitution in itself should not be eradicated but that it should be confined to certain areas where it is less disturbing. The fact that most of the women involved in street prostitution were foreign, and some of them used drugs, further increased social tensions and supported the perception that it was difficult to “deal” with them. This is also in line with what was described earlier as the de-rationalization of prostitutes (by depicting them as deviant), which excludes them from the debate. Furthermore, the use of the term “heroin whores” by the news presenter strongly suggests that the “whore stigma”, as referred to earlier in the discussion of the social/moral order frame, is very relevant in the Belgian context. The negative images of marginalized groups of society, in this case sex workers, sent out by the media are not without consequences and they fuel further stigmatization and exclusion. A study in six British cities found that countering the sensational stereotypes of sex workers as spread by the media by giving voice to all the parties involved (sex workers as well as residents with more nuanced opinions) enhanced the relations between sex workers and community residents (O’Neill et al., 2008). In the news fragments, only residents who held negative opinions on street prostitution were given the narrative and it is not clear to what extent they represented the opinion of the wider community.

Research in the UK suggests that especially the voices of the more nuanced residents tend to become overshadowed (Sagar & Jones, 2012), which could also have been the case in the news reporting in Flanders.

Second, prostitution was a problem when it was organized by criminal “mafia-like” networks that lured women from countries with little economic opportunities to Belgium, where these women were sexually exploited. Here, some elements of the oppression/sexual domination frame can be recognized as these women involved were described as victims and referred to as “girls” which is in stark contrast with the narratives in the reporting on neighborhood issues. However, the focus in the news reports went to the eradication and control of the criminal networks rather than to the eradication of prostitution itself, as would be expected within an oppression/sexual domination frame. In fact, the exploitation of foreign girls in brothels and bars run by such criminal networks was seen as imposing unfair competition to the Belgian brothels and bars who treat “their girls” better. Thus, the image of the prostitute as a victim only applied to those situations in which actual sexual exploitation was identified. Even in these situations, however, the shift from the victim to the deviant was easily made. In two occasions, it was mentioned that women who were found to be trafficked were arrested because they were in the country illegally and subsequently deported to their country of origin. This shift can be explained by what O’Brien et al. (2013) describe as the “good” versus the “bad” victim. The good victim is innocent and had never the intention to engage in sex work (but she was tricked or kidnapped), while the bad victim knew that she was going to be employed as a sex worker (O’Brien et al., 2013).

Conclusively, prostitution is problematized in the Flemish news when certain boundaries are crossed, but it is tolerated when it takes place within those boundaries (i.e. when it is restricted to certain areas and not organized by criminal networks). Thereby the prostitute is depicted as a whore and a deviant as well as a victim and a sex worker depending on her personal background and the context in which she operates. In some occasions different representations became conflated when women who were described as victims subsequently were described as illegal immigrants. The voice of the prostitutes themselves remained marginalized despite the elaborate use of visual material.

#### **4. GENERAL CONCLUSION**

This chapter discussed the different ways in which prostitution is framed and how such frames are reflected in various prostitution policies. We presented the pro rights/sex work frame, the social/moral order frame and the oppression/sexual domination frame as three distinctive frames. The social/moral order frame and the oppression/sexual domination frame depict

prostitution as problematic and thereby benefit from the depiction of sex workers as a homogeneous group to which a range of problems is attributed. The pro rights/sex work frame emphasizes the voluntary choices that sex workers make and the harm that is done to them by failing to put good regulation policy in place. By describing the different elements of these frames, ranging from problem definition to remedy representation, this chapter pointed out how these frames can be problematic or have real-life consequences, mainly for those working in prostitution. In the second part, we analyzed how prostitution is framed in Flemish news shows. We found that reporting on prostitution mainly focused on organized criminality and social disorder in the public space. This depiction of prostitution as mainly crime-ridden is a characteristic of most Western media reporting on prostitution (Wagenaar, Altink and Amesberger, 2013). Women working in prostitution were mainly framed as deviant rather than as victims, suggesting that Flemish media reporting on prostitution can be better understood in the light of a moral/social order frame.

Yet, one of the most striking observations from our framing analysis is that in the past ten years, prostitution was hardly a salient issue in Flemish television news media. This lack of interest for prostitution related issues was also illustrated recently when Belgian Minister of Domestic Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Joëlle Milquet (CDH), spoke publicly about the need for a stricter prostitution policy in Belgium in September 2013 at the Inter-Ministerial Conference on the “politics regarding the fight against human trafficking and the exploitation of the prostitution of others”. In an interview with the free newspaper “Metro” (30<sup>th</sup> September 2014), Milquet explained that a lot of women work in prostitution against their will. In order to combat such exploitation, the Minister claimed that policy should focus less on the supply side of prostitution but should aim at reducing the demand side. Following the example of Sweden, Milquet stated that by making visiting prostitutes punishable, the demand would diminish. Although Milquet’s perspective on prostitution policy implies the hardening of the current policy that could drastically impact the lives of women working in prostitution, media attention for the topic quickly dissolved.

Notwithstanding the lack of media attention, prostitution policies are fiercely debated not only by scholars or activists but also at different government levels. Recently, an important plenary session was held by the European Parliament. Based on a report of the MEP Mary Honeyball, this plenary session voted a non-binding resolution to criminalize clients of sex workers, recognizing that “prostitution violates human dignity and human rights” (European Women’s Lobby, 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2014). The Honeyball report was however contested by 560 NGOs and civil society organizations as well as 86 academics and researchers who signed letters to prevent the European Parliament for relying on the report. It is clear that who or what is con-

sidered as problematic and what type of remedies or solutions aid women who work in prostitution remains subject of debate. A general lack of broad scale empirical data on prostitution makes fertile ground for debates where certain frames (abolitionist frames) have become more powerful than others (pro rights frames) for influencing policy. As Wagenaar, Altink and Amesberger note (2013), it is important to be aware of the underlying moral nature of prostitution policy. How prostitution is framed as problematic and how such presentations are reproduced by media or other influential actors can impact considerably on what type of policies are developed and implemented (Wagenaar, Altink, & Amesberger, 2013).

We looked at the media framing of prostitution in the two major Flemish news shows. We do like to stress that more research is needed to fully understand the different frames that exist alongside each other. In a next step, we should research the different frames that are present in Walloon news shows and more regional based news shows or other media sources. Apart from media framing, it is equally important to gain insight into the frames that are used by other actors related to prostitution policy making, such as academics, NGOs, interest groups, social movements and policy makers, yet also sex workers and their clients. The next step, then, becomes the analysis of why some frames are more powerful than others in influencing prostitution policy or why certain frames are more accessible than others for the public to go along with. As a final remark we like to add that understanding the complexities that characterize prostitution cannot be captured by frames that are stuck at binaries such as acceptable/deviant, voluntary/forced. A frame that aims to leave such binaries is the polymorphous frame as proposed by Weitzer (2010), which states that the sex market is highly segmented and complex, where different segments need to deal with different challenges and risks. It remains to be seen if and how this frame will be picked up by powerful agents such as the media and if and how it will work through in policy-making.

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