Patriotism, Pragmatism, and Prostitution: Interplay of Class, Political, Gender, and Medical Issues in the Borderlands

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I met Sarita in the Conga, a house of prostitution in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. This particular house of ill-repute boasted of a rather notorious and prosperous past, and although the club had seen better days, one could still detect traces of its past elegance. A small, compact woman of fifty-four, Sarita’s seamless face belied her age. She ushered me into her “room.” Decorated in pretty pastels, with a candle-laden shrine to the Virgin Mary blazing in one corner and the sounds of an American television show emanating from the other, I entered Sarita’s private room at the back of the club and sat down on her bed—the only place available. Sarita proudly informed me that she no longer really “worked” at the Conga. Instead, she tallied up and dispensed the number of fichas (tokens) each woman earned nightly. Tokens were issued to prostitutes for various reasons, most importantly from customers who bought the women drinks. Sarita explained that her job was really of the utmost importance. Although she has worked in the Conga zona for much of her adult life, Sarita hopes to retire within a year to spend time with her family. The following excerpt from an oral interview with Sarita illustrates how marginalized women involved in borderland prostitution can reveal much about the state, international relations, issues of public health, public morals, and class relations.

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friend who later became my husband. Sadly, he died in a car accident in 1961. I was three months pregnant at the time and when my husband died I didn’t want to think about anything, not even eating. I only wanted to sleep. I thought life had no meaning. But when I had my child I thought I had to continue living, for him and my family. After delivering the baby, I moved in with my parents and spent three years after my little boy’s birth in my parent’s home.

Then I came to Nogales, Sonora, after some friends of mine told me how much money I could make there. That was why a lot of women came, because they knew someone who told them that they should come and make lots of money. I worked in a woman’s house for a while as a servant but soon moved back to Guadalajara. In 1965 I returned to Nogales because my family needed money and went to work in the Mona Lisa, an elegant and popular cabaret. At first I was very ashamed, and would not even talk to anyone, but I soon gained confidence and began to work as a prostitute. I left the Mona Lisa after only three months when my son became very ill and had to have an operation. I nursed him back to health and returned to the Mona Lisa in 1967, but things were very different. All the girls that worked there in 1965 got along very well, but now they fought all the time over silly things; like because they were drunk. My old patrona, Maria Bejarano, was a very good woman. She protected us from disease, dressed us well and tried very hard to please us. But she had diabetes, which had caused her to become blind, and she died when I returned. Her husband sold everything, and so I moved to the Conga.

This place was really fancy and the patrona treated us very well, plus the women did not fight with one another. We even had our own private doctor who checked us every week to make sure we were healthy. At the Mona Lisa we went to the same doctor as everyone else in the zona. I never had any bad diseases, syphilis, gonorrhea, cancer, I never had any of them. The doctor gave us injections and we had protection. When a client came into our room we would say “Let me see su miembro [your penis].” If we saw something we did not like we did not take their money. We had classes where the nurses showed us films about what types of symptoms to look for in a man and how a woman feels who has a disease. There was not an official system to check out the men, but my dueñas [madams] always told me to do it. The money was always very good and I was able to send a lot of money back to my family and support my son. Around that time we made about three dollars and fifty cents for twenty minutes or twenty dollars per night. I worked with all types of women: Americans, Mexicans, Philippines [sic], Japanese, and our clients came from everywhere also. But we mostly had Americans and rich Mexicans.
At that time the zona was very busy; every night the entire block was filled with cars, and there were almost too many soldiers. Every Wednesday we got a free day where we could go downtown to do our shopping, otherwise we had to stay within the zona. We could bring one bag and we had to turn that over to the police when we returned. Some women dressed and acted improperly when they went shopping, but I never did. I always dressed very decently and acted in a very proper manner so I never had any problems. I think that was the best way to be.

There was a lot of oppression by the police, and they were very bad to us; if they saw us in a restaurant they would talk to the patrón and make them pay a fine. You had to get permission from the police to do everything: to go to the doctor, to go to the bank with the money, your house, to see your children, for everything. Some women did not always follow these rules. We were supposed to obey, but some women found it easy to leave. But if the police saw them they got in trouble, and then the patrón had to come and pay money to get them out of trouble. A lot of women met and married rich foreign men. One of my friends, Cynthia, met a millionaire who was on vacation in Mexico. She married him and moved back to Michigan, where she now has children. Other women retired and lived in Nogales. In the past, people may have criticized prostitution but those in the centro [center of town] more or less accepted us as we brought them a lot of business. Plus we shopped there ourselves.

I always have felt ashamed to be a prostitute; shame, much shame. I did not want to work as a prostitute, but then I always thought of my family. My family needed money to go to school, to live, and so I continued working. I was the oldest and so I had to work to help out my younger brothers and sisters; I made a lot of money. Now they are all happy and have good jobs. So now that I don't have to worry about them anymore I can quit this job and move into my house. Maybe I will quit in a year or so.

Sarita's history illustrates the rich and virtually untapped possibilities for the study of marginalized women involved in borderlands prostitution. Her story contains many classic elements of marginalization: namely economic need, migration, matrilocal family structure, and strict state regulation. Yet, in spite of the potential for investigation, few scholars have adequately examined the topic. This essay attempts to partially close this gap in borderlands scholarship through an examination of prostitution regulation. In particular, this study will focus upon Nogales, Sonora, although information from other border cities will be included.

In a tourist-centered economy, oriented toward United States servicemen and foreign tourists, prostitutes formed an integral part of the
borderlands economic community. Cabarets and other establishments that employed prostitutes not only attracted outside business, but also generated a considerable amount of municipal tax revenues and provided an important financial outlet for economically marginal women.\(^4\) Ironically, in light of the integral role of prostitutes in the economy, borderlands communities severely circumscribed their lives with strict rules and regulations. The rationale for the regulatory measures of the borderlands *zonas de tolerancia* (circumscribed areas that permitted prostitution) yields insights into broader topics, including diplomatic relations and cooperation between the United States and Mexican governments, political infighting between local, state and federal governments, and issues of class, morality, and health.

The influence and actual drive behind the regulation of borderlands prostitution cannot be traced to a single source. Various factors contributed to the debates surrounding the proper "handling" of prostitutes and the business of prostitution. The situation of cities, such as Nogales, located on the international boundary with the United States, posed a special and most peculiar situation. In the 1940s and 1950s, transborder movement reached a peak. Many military personnel stationed in the border region spent their paychecks in Mexican border cities. The time soldiers and tourists spent in the zonas worried American officials concerned about the spread of venereal disease. Thus, an examination into the diplomatic measures employed to address this problem provides a unique empirical avenue into United States-Mexico relations.

Initially, instead of closing down the border to deal with the control of venereal disease, American officials regulated the behavior of their own personnel and citizens. By the mid-1940s, authorities reached a general consensus on border-crossing rules. Naval personnel from the Eleventh Naval District, which encompassed much of the southwestern United States from California to New Mexico, were permitted to spend time in bordertowns in uniform with identification cards and passes signed by the commanding officer. The *enseñada* (border town region) included any town within seventy-five miles of the international boundary. Military authorities limited such liberty to men of good conduct, and stipulated that they needed to remain circumspect in behavior during their time in Mexico. Rules limited regular visits to one day only, not to begin before 8:00 a.m. and not to exceed 11:00 p.m. In order to further maintain order, officials granted passes to no more than 5 percent of the enlisted men at any one time.\(^5\)

Military authorities also restricted specific ports of entry for various reasons. In 1943, regulations prohibited naval personnel from entering Mexico through bordertowns in Arizona, New Mexico, and California's Imperial Valley. This prohibition caused some confusion and agitation as reflected in a letter Brigadier General Thoburn K. Brown sent to the
commandant in 1943 that asked for clarification. He complained that many naval personnel from Phoenix, Arizona, traveled to Nogales only to be refused entry once they reached the border. General Brown's confusion stemmed from the fact that the War Department permitted army personnel to visit Mexico inside of a twenty-kilometer zone. In spite of Brown's queries, by 1945 only Nogales, Sonora, remained on the prohibited list for unspecified reasons.\(^6\)

In order to more specifically combat venereal contagion, military authorities situated prophylaxis stations on the American side of bortertowns. For example, in 1943 the military established a "Sanitary and First Aid Station" in Tijuana for military and civilian personnel at any time during the day or night. Commanding officers encouraged returning servicemen to take advantage of the available health services. Many apparently heeded the advice of their superior officers as reports on the use of border stations far outnumbered other stations established further away from the border.\(^7\)

By the late 1940s, venereal disease control along the border necessitated further action by American and Mexican officials. Monthly venereal disease control reports for the Eleventh Naval District regularly cited Tijuana as the prime site of exposure and subsequent contagion for military personnel. Any increases or decreases in the venereal disease rate attributable to Tijuana warranted the attention of the appropriate officials. The rise in venereal disease rates intensified border crossing issues. Newspapers reported on periodic threats to close down the border in order to eliminate high incidents of venereal infection tracked back to Tijuana. Reports in 1948 and 1949 indicate a tough stance from American officials interested in cleaning up Tijuana. In January 1949, Senator Harley M. Kilgore, a Democrat from West Virginia, visited the Tijuana area and urged an investigation into the situation. He wrote to Senator Millard Tydings, chair of the Armed Services Committee, "that unless the incidence of venereal disease in Tijuana could be diminished considerably, it might be advisable for the Armed Services Committee to recommend to the Navy that it declare the Tijuana area off-limits to Naval personnel."\(^8\) Other officials, such as Major General E.P. Parker, Armed Forces Disciplinary Board chair, doubted that authorities would accomplish anything without closing the border. He complained that a Tijuana venereal disease investigation in June 1947 eventually proved unsuccessful when the civil administration switched hands in November. After the change in Tijuana city government, the infection rate increased dramatically as over half of the new infection cases for the Eleventh District had an origin traceable to Tijuana. Major General Parker indicated that he did not expect, nor would he accept, a repeat perfor-
mance in Tijuana. To support his recommendation, he cited a drop of 75 percent in new infection rates after the 1948 when Matamoros, Mexico was deemed off limits to military personnel stationed in Texas.9

In spite of the tough talk about closing the border, officials appeared hesitant to completely shut it down as Commandant B.H. Bieri commented that "closing the border to military personnel will attract undesirable elements to San Diego and may result in conditions less desirable than those which at present exist. There would be a definite increase in the San Diego rate." In his opinion, closing the border to uniformed military personnel would only cause the establishment of little shops renting inexpensive civilian clothing for servicemen to use.10

Mexican officials had concerns of their own regarding the large numbers of American servicemen who visited the bordertowns. A 1948 report on the Mexican border cited seven and one-half disciplinary infractions per week by military personnel in the Tijuana area. Most of these infractions involved drunken and disorderly conduct that led to rowdy, destructive, and insolent behavior. Offenses ranged from the case of a WAVE (Women Appointed for Voluntary Emergency Service) arrested for being so inebriated as to not know who or where she was, to a sailor arrested for an altercation with the Tijuana police in which he broke the watch of one of the officers. Perhaps one of the worst cases involved a sailor from the USS Mervine, arrested for assaulting a Mexican civilian and his pregnant wife. Apparently, he grabbed the woman by her "privates" and struck her husband, cutting his forehead seriously. Abuse worked both ways, however, as in a 1944 case when American officials charged two Mexican policemen with excessive force against a Marine private on leave in Mexicali.11

Before Senator Kilgore called for a drastic cleanup, officials attempted to decrease the incidence of venereal infection. In 1945, authorities from the border areas in both countries convened in El Paso, Texas and then Ciudad Juárez, Mexico at the United States-Mexico Border Public Health Association to discuss possible cooperative strategies to battle dangerous levels of venereal contagion.12 A December 1946 letter from General J.B. Oldendorf, the commandant of the Eleventh Naval District, to General Juan Felipe Rico, the commandant of the Second Military Zone of Mexico, aptly demonstrates the mutual respect, cooperation, and non-confrontational relationship that exhibited between some borderlands officials. Oldendorf wrote:

We have made a great deal of progress in our controls of liquor sales both in San Diego and Tijuana. . . . However, there still exists the age-old problem of venereal disease control, and again as military men, I am sure you and I will find a common means of solving this problem in behalf of our people. . . . I would greatly
appreciate your study of the matter and will welcome from you any suggestion that will counter a situation which threatens to force me into an action I would deeply regret—that of having to prohibit general visiting in Tijuana by personnel of the Navy and Marine Corps. I feel that our years of practical military experience permit me to frankly discuss the situation which is giving me deepest concern. . . . I appreciate that you and your civil leaders also are aware of the need for some urgent corrective to halt the spread of the dread disease menacing our respective people. . . . I await your suggestions, with the knowledge that, together, we again can defeat a common enemy. 13

By 1948, the United States Central Armed Forces Disciplinary Control Board passed along suggestions for the elimination of the venereal contagion threat posed by the bordertowns. Plans were in the works for a joint American–Mexican action that would involve not only officials, but business and civic organizations in order to ensure the success of the endeavor. Within a year, the United States Department of State and the Pan–American Sanitary Bureau, represented by Dr. Joseph A. Spoto and Dr. John R. Murdock, arranged with Dr. I. Morones, Mexico’s director of health, for a visit to those Mexican border cities viewed as sources of venereal infection for military personnel. Tijuana was on their list of suspects as officials from the United States Health Service, the Pan–American Sanitary Bureau, and Mexico’s Health Department visited this city and Mexicali on 21 January 1949. 14

Despite increased pressure on and public criticism of American diplomats, military officials refrained from declaring the bordertowns “out of bounds.” Senator Kilgore claimed that Commandant Bieri’s inaction regarding the matter of venereal disease control in Tijuana prompted his transfer to the United Nations Security Council in New York, and Kilgore praised the swift actions of the Secretary of the Navy in the matter. Kilgore’s smug accusations sparked tempers in the border region, however, as Captain Ross A. Dierdof, the public information officer of the Eleventh Naval District, commented: “It’s a shame that the career of one of the finest men I’ve ever known has to be slurred by a politician not fit for the Admiral to wipe his shoes on.” 15

Nevertheless, border officials continued their cooperative efforts, partly because of a presidential injunction to all Mexican governors of border states to enforce the regulations and laws regarding prostitution. In a conference with the Department of State and Admiral Louis Denfeld, the Chief of Naval Operations, American officials decided that perhaps the best means of influencing Mexican authorities was to invite them to the monthly meetings of the Armed Forces Disciplinary Control Board in San Diego. Here, Mexican officials would have the opportunity
to witness the effective cooperation of this board with the American public to control venereal disease. The State Department hoped that after a few meetings a discussion of the problem in Tijuana could be tactfully addressed. The American consul in Tijuana, Waldo Bailey, delivered invitations to the Mexican consul, Tijuana's police chief, and city health officials in the interest of discussing "mutual problems" of "mutual interest." Thereafter, these officials established the "Tijuana Project for Control along the U.S.-Mexico-border area" effective the first of September 1949.

The border project involved the cooperation of the United States Public Health Service, the army and navy medical services, the California State Health Department, and the federal and territorial authorities of Mexico in order to improve the "conditions associated with flagrant prostitution and allied vice in the border area . . . [to] benefit not only naval personnel, but the citizens of the United States and Mexico as well." Although efforts in the United States to combat venereal disease involved a complete suppression of prostitution, the Tijuana project had slightly different aims. Officials hoped to better regulate prostitution in order to eliminate potential contagion danger. Reports demonstrated a marked improvement, but problems still existed as only 55 percent of all prostitutes routinely visited the Tijuana clinic, in spite of continued efforts by border officials. Nevertheless, the program continued into the 1950s after a two-year progress report favorably gauged the overall success of the project. A commandant personally recommended the continued cooperation of the program when a dramatic decrease in venereal infection rates traceable to Tijuana was reported. Rates decreased from a high of 15.5 per thousand in 1949 to 11.9 per thousand in 1951.

For some officials in the United States the successful results of the Tijuana project did not come quickly enough. Senator Kilgore demanded that the border be closed, so a hurried agreement between the United States military and State Department, Public Health Service, Pan-American Sanitary Bureau, and the Mexican Minister of Health could be reached. The agreement stipulated the following: the Mexican government would support venereal disease control programs throughout the border region; the Pan-American Sanitary Bureau would assume the supervision of these programs; the same bureau would implement a plan of action; and, Mexican law enforcement agencies would support the agreed-upon medical controls.

The influence of this agreement throughout the borderlands is difficult to gauge. In Sonora, the effects may be viewed through meetings, held in Nogales, Arizona beginning in 1955, of the United States-Mexico Border Public Health Association to discuss venereal contagion control.

Moreover, relations between local officials in Nogales, Arizona and
Nogales, Sonora also exhibited a similar spirit of cooperation like their counterparts in Tijuana and California. Louis Sotomayor, chief of police in Nogales, Arizona during the 1940s and 1950s, commented on the "closeness" of the police forces in the Ambos (both) Nogales communities. This allowed for the elimination of "red tape," and Sotomayor attributed the relatively "trouble-free" Arizona side in part to these close ties, but also to the booming business in prostitution on the Sonoran side as he commented:

We were on a first name basis with the police department over there. . . . We needed them and they needed us. . . . If you wanted to keep law and order you needed each other's cooperation. Mexico does not have an extradition pact . . . they will not turn over one of their people. . . . They [prostitutes] couldn't compete over here. . . . They used to brag that we had no prostitution and took credit for it because we had such good law enforcement units . . . nah, they just couldn't compete.20

In the United States, officials opted to completely suppress all prostitution in order to better protect the military and civil populations. This strategy did not solve the problem in the borderlands, however, where military authorities had to deal with prostitution in Mexico as well as the United States. Nonetheless, border officials from both Mexico and the United States displayed a very practical approach to the problems prostitution posed. Neither an imposition of American values, nor a blatant disregard by Mexican officials for the concerns and needs of American authorities accounted for prostitution control. Instead, border authorities opted for the employment of a cooperative spirit to battle what they considered a common enemy.

The influence American officials exerted concerning the control of venereal disease in the United States coincided with similar concerns in Mexico and affected the regulatory legislation passed throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Along with the economic development of northern Mexico, border cities, including Nogales, embarked on ambitious city beautification and morally edifying "projects" to encourage modernity and order in their fledgling communities. Within this program, prostitution became a "contested terrain," and the regulation of women's bodies in Mexico served as a "stage" where various federal, state, and local struggles were played out. In Nogales, two "phases" of prostitution control can be determined, although a great deal of overlap occurred. First, in the early- and mid-1940s, a rhetoric of repression, couched in patriotic terms and espoused by federal and state officials, replaced a previous policy of pragmatic regulation. By the 1950s, however, a more pragmatic approach again gained salience, although it was accompanied
by renewed efforts to clean up the border with definite moralistic and class overtones. In both phases, a conflict between rhetoric and reality existed, and the prostitute stood as a symbol of revilement, as a “problem” to be fixed either through repression or regulation.

In the early 1940s, Sonoran legislators embarked upon an ambitious plan to make Sonoran cities better for those belonging to una vida civilizada (a civilized life), and their attention once again turned to prostitution. By the mid-twentieth century, Mexican federal law did not prohibit prostitution, a situation that caused tremendous variance in the organization of centros de vicio (centers of vice). Yet, as early as 1930, the Sonoran Código Sanitario (Sanitation Code) delineated the boundaries of the commercial prostitution area (zona). Many other cities possessed a zona. Typically, sanitation authorities established the areas by prohibiting cabarets in downtown districts or within 500 meters of schools, churches, or public walkways. Article 389 of the 1930 Sonoran code prohibited prostitutes from attending churches, theaters, or walking in public areas where they could be easily identified. Furthermore, a meretrice (prostitute) diagnosed with a venereal disease was interned at a hospital until her “cure” or until the doctor permitted her departure.21

Another 1930 law the state legislature passed, Ley que Aprueba el Reglamento de Prostitución (Law that Approves the Regulation of Prostitution), augmented the Código Sanitario. The statute demanded that all female prostitutes submit to medical exams, registration, and civic regulation. After a medical exam, prostitutes received “patents” to work, which they were required to carry at all times. In order to continue working, every registered prostitute had to submit to health inspections every Saturday. In addition, prostitutes were not permitted to live outside the zona, to leave the area and mix with the general populace, or to have minors of either sex in the bordellos, even their own children.22

These regulations and restrictions circumscribing the lives of the prostitutes may have achieved particular salience distinguishing between the middle- and upper-classes, the gente decente (the respectable people), and the lower classes, but not necessarily prostitutes. For example, women could be defined as prostitutes if they frequented cabarets or lived in one, acted in a publicly licentious manner, or if they contracted a venereal disease while unmarried. Clearly, these distinctions gave officials significant leeway in defining who was a prostitute, and it is almost certain that abuse occurred.

A 1940 revision of the federal Código Sanitario indicated a change in policy as the new legislation specifically targeted anti-venereal disease reform. Dr. Enrique Villela of the Mexican federal health department recorded the new anti-venereal legislation and provided commentary and helpful solutions to the problem of prostitution. Although not prohibited, prostitution was considered undesirable as Villela cited statis-
tics that indicated a 95 percent venereal infection rate for all prostitutes. Thus, the law targeted prostitution as a "dangerous" and "anti-social" activity; officials subsequently believed they needed to reduce the number of prostitutes. In spite of the abolitionist rhetoric, the new legislation included prostitutes in its program. They were still required to submit to medical exams and regulation as public health depended, in large part, on the success of the anti-venereal disease campaign reforms within the prostitute population. 23

Amendments to the Código Penal (penal code) also exhibited a more abolitionist tone. Article 199 reflected the perceived threat posed by venereal infection by defining venereal contagion as a part of Delito de Lesiones, or crimes of physical harm or damage. The article penalized any infected person who knowingly endangered the health of another individual by engaging in sexual relations. Denoted as a particularly heinous crime because it endangered not only the individual but also the "biological soundness" of the race, a conviction included up to three years in prison and a fine of up to $3,000 pesos. The law generally exempted married people unless one spouse filed a complaint. This nueva moralidad (new morality) intended to eliminate much of the danger of contagion through reforms directed toward organized, commercial prostitution. 24

A patriotic rhetoric of repression soon replaced these semi-pragmatic policies as matters relating to national defense obfuscated the larger issues of public health and venereal disease control. With the onset of World War II, President Manuel Avila Camacho issued several presidential decrees dealing with matters pertaining to national and civil defense. In June 1942, the president suspended certain constitutional rights for as long as Mexico remained in a state of war with Germany, Italy, and Japan. Article four of this decree reserved the right to impose on all departments of the Public Administration any modifications necessary for the effective defense of national territory and the maintenance of fundamental institutions. In September, President Camacho mobilized all sectors of the civil population and took the necessary measures to guarantee maximum production and to centralize defense under government-designated civil defense authorities. 25

The regulation of prostitution fell under the scrutiny of federal officials, and President Camacho issued a letter to all state governors in September 1942, urging the closure of all zonas in Sonora. Camacho charged that prostitution caused inefficiency in the military and civilian populations, that it served as the main medium for disseminating venereal disease, and that vice centers often became focal points for dangerous activities and bases for subversive or disloyal elements. In the interest of self-defense, Camacho asked that each state government begin a campaign of education and repression of prostitution. He pro-
posed to completely close the zonas and end periodic medical exams. The president demanded the cooperation of federal, state, territorial, and municipal authorities to ensure the accomplishment of these goals, and he held up the program in Ciudad Juárez as an exemplar for all to follow.26

Tired of the problems that accompanied a zona, Ciudad Juárez officials began their Campaña contra la Prostitución y las Enfermedades Venéreas (Campaign Against Prostitution and Venereal Disease) in 1942 in conjunction with the United States and the Washington, D.C.–based Pan-American Sanitary Office. Local authorities attributed their initial ideas to “European nations, advanced in culture and human civilization [who] after arriving at the end of very serious studies and experiments of all classes arrived at the conclusion that the zones of tolerance, established since time immemorial, were useless for controlling these diseases.”27 In light of what they and President Camacho viewed as a very successful and complete repression of prostitution, Ciudad Juárez authorities referred to their efforts as a guide for others to follow, or “the torch that you carry in your hands, will be a guide not only for Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, Texas, United States of North America, but for all the nation.”28

In response to these presidential injunctions, Governor Anselmo Valenzuela of Sonora stated his firm belief in the importance of eradicating prostitution centers, and he mentioned that his state had been working toward the abolition of laws regulating prostitution. Governor Valenzuela transmitted the president’s injunctions to all municipal presidents with explicit instructions to implement the necessary measures to put the president’s orders into practice. In 1943, the new Sonoran governor, General Abelardo L. Rodríguez, “cheerfully” offered the maximum collaboration of all officials from the state of Sonora in achieving the “highest efficacy in repressing prostitution.”29

Although the governors heartily endorsed and attempted to implement the ambitious prostitution repression program, evidence from the municipality of Nogales suggests that local officials, cabaret owners, and prostitutes did not heed the president’s injunctions. Newspapers frequently reported on the continued existence of the zona and complained about the blatant disregard local authorities had for the orders of the governor. The governor ordered the closure of Sonora’s zonas in late 1942, but several articles in 1943 and 1944 cited robberies in the district and complained about the establishment of El Tivoli, reportedly a house of prostitution located between a school and a hospital.30 Other articles bluntly attacked the conduct of city officials. Perhaps in an attempt to shame local authorities into action, a 1943 article printed the names of those officials who ignored the law and singled out the cabarets and the names of their owners who offered the services of prosti-
tutes in overt disregard for the presidential decree and gubernatorial orders. 31

The most bombastic and sarcastic article directly indicted local officials for their hypocrisy. The press continued to receive numerous reports from city officials that the zona did not exist, in spite of the numerous robberies and other incidents in the brothels, suggesting it continued to exist. Perhaps to quell criticism, an agent of the Public Ministry staged a raid of the zona, but the raid uncovered no evidence of prostitution. Furthermore, the dueñas of those establishments involved in the raids signed a deposition certifying that the raids did occur and that they had no future intentions of violating the law in their establishments. In response to these staged raids and authoritative insistence that the zona did not exist, a reporter wryly commented: “It has been more than 300 years since Galileo proposed that the Earth moved and the Sun was the center of our planetary system. An ignorant tribunal passed down a sentence of heresy and negated the scientific theory established by Copernicus, another great wise one, and nevertheless the Earth continued to move, notwithstanding that the official truth would change the order of the planetary system.” 32

With the beginning of the post-war period, the prostitute debate shifted away from the impractical repression rhetoric to a more pragmatic policy designed to “protect” the community from possible moral and physiological contagion. A broader nationwide fight against vice figured into these debates. A 1954 newspaper article detailed the renewed efforts to fight against vice in order to protect the family, “the nerve of the nation.” The national program, according to the president of the campaign, Ignacio Martin del Campo, aimed to mobilize all sectors of society to attain the “ambitious” and “noble” goal. 33 The prostitute, as a symbol of revilement, assumed an even more salient position as the people of Nogales, with more moralistic than patriotic overtones, intensified their efforts to “clean up” their city, to rid the community of the danger of venereal disease, and to further define the line of demarcation between the gente decente and those of the lower classes—particularly, but not exclusively, prostitutes.

The 1955 Código Penal for the state of Sonora reflected the more pragmatic attitude toward prostitution and emphasized a need to protect the precarious morality of some components of society. Unlike the federal code of 1940, which distinctly specified the particulars of this crime in the interest of repressing organized prostitution, the new 1955 state code defined lenocinio (pandering) more broadly to include anyone who exploited the body of a woman for comercio carnal (prostitution). Significantly, the state legislature placed the law under the rubric of Delitos contra la Moral Publica y las Buenas Costumbres (crimes against public morality and good customs). Those who exploited the bodies of mi-
nors received stiffer punishments of six months to two years in prison, plus a hefty fine. An authority figure who exploited a minor under their protection lost the right to *patria potestad* (parental guardianship) for ten years and received a prison sentence ranging from one to eight years. 34

Federal amendments to the Código Sanitario in 1950 and 1955 reflected an interest in protecting the health of the people of Mexico and the influence of the United States, through the establishment of clear guidelines to protect against the transmission of diseases by persons entering Mexico through the ports of entry. The 1950 code designated the establishment of sanitary services in air, land, and water entries in order to ensure the protection of national territory from infections and transmitted between humans or from other countries. Although many of these measures aimed to combat non-venereal diseases, Article 117 specifically provided for the regulation of prostitution and for venereal disease prevention. 35 In the 1955 revisions, federal authorities approved even more specific regulatory measures to halt the debilitating effects of venereal infections. In places where there was a "normal danger" of endemic disease (they specifically cited the inhabitants of the zona), participants needed to pay sanitation authorities a fee to construct and support health service facilities. 36

Interviews with local residents indicate that officials in Nogales instituted some laws that specifically "protected" the population from prostitutes and that further defined the demarcation between the general populace and the prostitute population. For example, throughout the 1950s, local authorities permitted prostitutes to leave the zona only one day per week (Wednesday) to shop, see a movie, or spend time with their children. According to local inhabitants, "good" mothers kept their children inside when prostitutes walked the city streets, and residents also avoided the movie theaters on these days so they would not have to mingle with the potentially dangerous prostitutes. 37

Even more significantly, municipal health records indicate that by 1953 prostitutes received weekly injections of penicillin. This service was similar to border prophylaxis stations that provided penicillin tablets to soldiers and tourists after sexual exposure. In the United States, however, the authorities did not require men to take these tablets, whereas prostitutes in Nogales had to submit to the injections or risk losing their licenses. Furthermore, they were assumed to be contaminated, and one should note that the state, which disallowed for others to intervene in women's bodies, seemed to reserve this honor for itself through the forced weekly injections of all prostitutes.

The continuance of the zona did not escape the critical eye of citizens concerned with the moral and physical well-being of Nogales. In a 1953 letter to the press, Dr. Francisco Arriola Gándara, chief of the Health
and Assistance Unit in Nogales, defended what he considered an unfair attack in several local newspapers, including *el Acción Diario Independiente*. He defended the regulation of the zona and attributed this to the radical reduction of the venereal infection rate from 75–80 percent in 1950 to a reality in 1953 of only 3 percent. Furthermore, none of the services came out of municipal coffers, due to the formation of a *Comité Auxiliar de la Profilaxis de las Enfermedades* (Auxiliary Committee for the Prevention of Disease). Cabaret, cantina, and *salon de baile* (dance hall) owners who housed prostitutes in their establishments financially supported the committee. In Gándara’s viewpoint, the abolition of prostitution in Nogales (and numerous other cities in Sonora) could not be accomplished quickly, and one needed to recognize prostitution in order to “battle her” and the concomitant threat of venereal contagion.  

Perhaps because of the severity and gravity of prostitution regulations, officials who abused their authority and attempted to live outside of the laws regarding prostitution and general moral decency particularly outraged the citizens of Nogales. An incident on 18 April 1960 at a local restaurant scandalized the community and galvanized the press into a scathing indictment of lax and abusive officials. Two families had hoped to eat a restful meal at the restaurant when the city chief of investigations, Francisco Soltero, entered with a *meretriz* (prostitute), who was both inebriated and in “undignified positions.” The reporter took ample opportunity to describe the scene and his indignation: “Drunk, with that posture, language and manners appropriate to a stupid person, with the complex of an ‘important authority,’ Soltero was demonstrating clearly just what is his personality.” The reporter extended Soltero’s behavior to include nearly all the municipal authorities who brought infamy upon Nogales through their inappropriate behavior. In addition, incidents like this greatly damaged family tourism: “Unfortunately for Nogales,” a journalist wrote, “there is no hope that there will be a change, on the contrary . . . the tolerance will remain because [the administration] has not wanted to become a good administration because each member . . . is an insult to good customs, the security of the families, and the real concept of the citizens.”

The issue of repression versus regulation achieved particular relevance during World War II, when patriotic, nationalist concerns dictated a policy of repression. Reality often diverged from rhetoric, however, and by the 1950s the impracticality of repression, evidenced by local officials’ disregard for federal and state policy, had been replaced by a more pragmatic policy of regulation. Running throughout both “phases” was a Nogales community attempt to present a “modern” facade, one informed by issues of morality and definite fears about the possible danger of venereal contagion. The outright regulation of pros-
titution from the mid-1940s and into the 1950s resulted in the crystallization of the image of borderland prostitutes as symbols of revilement in the community: an ironic and unfair position considering their centrality to the economic health of Nogales.

An examination of the regulatory measures employed to regulate prostitution in the borderlands illustrates broader discourses involving the state, inter-nation relations, medical, class, and moral concerns. American officials perceived unregulated prostitutes in the Mexican bordertowns as a direct threat to the health of American citizens and enlisted personnel alike. Their concern translated into action in the 1940s and 1950s as a part of a larger struggle to battle venereal disease. Officials in Washington, D.C. favored a harsh stance that involved completely closing the border, but, on a local level, diplomacy and cooperation characterized the tactics employed by authorities from both sides of the border to battle the "common enemy." United States–Mexico relations directly impinged upon the actual regulatory measures passed in state and federal legislatures. Issues of class, morality, and public health forced prostitution control to the forefront of the debate over the borderlands zonas de tolerancia. Initially, federal and state officials favored repressive tactics to completely eliminate prostitution and used patriotic, nationalistic language to buttress their arguments. Local officials in Nogales, although they outwardly acquiesced to the wishes of the state and federal governments, in reality largely ignored the calls for repressive actions. Subsequently, by the late 1940s and in the 1950s, officials returned to a more pragmatic approach to prostitution control. The prostitute, within a program to "clean up" bordertowns such as Nogales, had by then become a symbol of revilement and disease. Both legislative and locally-imposed regulations reflected the perceived need to protect the community from prostitutes by severely limiting and curtailing their lives. The story of Sarita, the prostitute who lived in Nogales during the 1960s, poignantly illustrates the inequitability of many of these regulations. As a widowed, migrant, female head-of-household, Sarita felt the pressure of economic necessity and frustration at not being able to find a job that covered her expenses. Thus, she turned to prostitution, a life that gave her economic viability in Nogales. Ironically, instead of applauding, or at least understanding her actions, officials exercised their power to circumscribe her existence, control her body, and assign her a tangible position of shame in society.

NOTES

1. Sarita's name has been changed to protect her identity.
2. Although Sarita's story is more contemporary, it is still valuable for several reasons. The interview focused upon her life before the 1970s, in particular the
years from 1965 to 1967. This was before the establishment of the maquiladora industry in the mid 1960s, which provided women with a key economic outlet. Thus, her reasons for entering prostitution probably differed little from women who worked ten years earlier. In addition, the United States still stationed large numbers of soldiers in the Southwest, and the majority of the regulations enforced in the 1950s still existed in the mid-1960s.


4. Municipal officials not only taxed prostitutes, but also the cabaret owners for various reasons, including the prostitutes they employed, alcohol sales, cabaret entertainment, and a monthly fee in order to employ prostitutes. From 1956 to 1959, this constituted 33 percent to 36 percent of the total municipal revenue. See Carlos Miller, Tesoria Municipal (Nogales, Sonora: 1958, Anexo no. 1), Pimería Alta Historical Society Archives, Nogales, Arizona.

5. Records of Shore Establishment and Naval Districts. Eleventh Naval District Records of the Commandant's Office General Correspondence, 1924–1935, (hereafter RG 181), EF44 345 1942, EF44 346 1943 [2/3], EF44 348 1944–46. The information in this section is primarily derived from California naval records located in the National Archives–Pacific Southwest Region (NAPSR), Laguna Niguel, California. Records from military establishments in Arizona are not yet available.


7. RG 181, P3 280 1947, 1950, P3–1 281 1945–6, P2–4 279 1943, NAPSR.

8. RG 181, P3 280, San Diego Journal (8 January 1948), newspaper clipping, NAPSR.


10. RG 181, P3 280 1948, NAPSR.

11. RG 181, P3 280 1948, EF44 345 1945, 1946, EF44 346 1944, NAPSR.

12. RG 181, EF44 345 1945–46, NAPSR.

13. Commandant J.B. Oldendorf to General Juan Felipe Rico, Commandant, Second Military Zone, Ensenada, Baja California, México, 26 December 1946, RG 181, EF44 345 1946, NAPSR.

14. RG 181, P3 349 1948 P3 280, 1949 [1/2], P3 280 1949, NAPSR.

15. RG 181, P3 280 1949, NAPSR.

16. Quote from RG 181, EF44 348 1948–49, P3 280 1949, NAPSR.

17. RG 181, P3 280 1949 [2/2], NAPSR.

18. RG 181, P3 280 1950, EF44 349 1951, NAPSR.


22. Editorial IPNSA, “Ley que Aprueba el Reglamento de Prostitución Formulado por el Ejecutivo del Estado para que Rija en esta Entidad–1930,” in Recopilación Legislativa del Estado de Sonora (Editorial IPNSA, Junio de 1978); Dr. Francisco Arriola Gándara to local press, Jefe de la Unidad de Salubridad y Asistencia, 10 October 1953, Caja Presidencia 61, expediente 4, asunto 12, Archivo Histórico del Municipio Nogales, Sonora, Mexico (AHMNS).

23. Dr. Enrique Villela, La Nueva Legislación Antivenereea Mexicana (Mexico, D.F.: Departamento de Salubridad, Oficina General de la Campaña Contra las
Enfermidades Venéreas, 1941) 35-37, 44, 51, 54, 59.


25. Secretario de Estado, Boletín Oficial del Gobierno Constitucional del Estado de Sonora (Hermosillo, Sonora: Oficinas del Palacio de Gobierno, 1959), Tomo XLIX, 20 de junio 1942, no. 49; Decreto que Aprueba la suspensión de las garantías individuales consignadas en varios artículos constitucionales; Tomo L, 19 de septiembre 1942, no. 24; Decreto que Instituye la Defensa Civil (hereafter cited as Boletín Oficial).

26. President Manuel Avila Camacho to Governor Anselmo Macias Valenzuela, 18 September 1942, Caja 550 '42/3, Archivo Histórico de Estado Hermosillo, Sonora (AHEHS).


28. Ibid., 3.

29. Governor Anselmo Macias Valenzuela to President Manuel Avila Camacho, 10 October 1942; Governor Anselmo Macias Valenzuela to Jefes de los Servicios Sanitarios Coordinados en el Estado, 10 October 1942; Quote from Governor General Abelardo L. Rodríguez to Dr. Victor Fernandez, Manero Jefe del Departamento de Salud, 24 September 1943, Caja 550 '42/3, AHEHS.

30. Acción Diario Independiente, Nogales, Sonora (8 September 1943), 1; Acción Diario Independiente, Nogales, Sonora (24 January 1944), 1 (hereafter DI).

31. DI (4 November 1943), 1.

32. Quote from DI (19 January 1944), 1; DI (4 November 1943), 1.

33. DI (23 February 1954), 1.


38. Dr. Francisco Arriola Gándara to the local press, Nogales, Sonora, 10 de octubre 1953, AHMNS, Caja Presidencia, 61, expediente 4, asunto 12.


40. Ibid., 1.