

GUATEMALA CITY, 30 NOVEMBER 2004

### Game Becomes Vital Conduit for 'Estrellas de la Linea'

News outlets over the past two months have seized on the story of Estrellas de la Linea (Stars of "The Tracks"), Guatemalan sex workers seeking to create a more human image of themselves through football. The idea came from filmmakers **Jose Maria Rodriguez** and **Jesus Velasco**, and from Guatemalan journalist **Andres Zepeda**. They are making a documentary film about life in "La Linea," a poor neighborhood on the edge of Guatemala City, where a railroad used to run. The women asked how to improve their lives and, specifically, how to gain custody rights of their children. Rather than standard-issue protests, the filmmakers suggested a football team: good for the film, one supposes, and good for the women.

As many as 17,000 women work in Guatemala's sex trade, one for every 150 men over age 15. Their popularity rivals the scorn they receive, such that, when Estrellas, in one of their early matches, allowed 18 goals—playing 5-on-5 on hardscrabble courts or bare ground—they still felt triumphant. "I felt so content after the game because [the opponents] were so polite to us, they didn't judge us and I liked how it felt to be treated with respect," said **Susy Sica**, 41, a Maya Indian and single mother of seven (**Catherine Elton**, "Prostitutes Win Respect with Soccer," *Miami Herald*, 31 October). The occasion contrasted sharply with the first fixture on 18 September against the girls' team from the **American School of Guatemala**. The identity of Estrellas at that point was unknown to officials of **Futeca**, a football academy and organizing entity for amateur men's, women's and youth leagues. Unknown, that is, until Estrellas started distributing flyers listing their demands for expanded rights. The league ejected Estrellas, citing the concern that, among other things, "the players' sweat might transmit sexual diseases" (**Carlos Arrazola**, "Guatemalan Prostitutes Booted from Soccer League," Agencia EFE, 25 September). Thus a story was born.



Following the EFE report, Guatemala's punditry weighed in. **Dina Fernández**, columnist for *Prensa Libre*, suggests that the women were exploited by the filmmakers and exposed to "public humiliation" so they might generate interesting footage ("**El partido de las Estrellas**," 27 September):

Porque empecemos por ahí: este episodio no se dio por generación espontánea. Los promotores de las "Estrellas" fueron a inscribir al equipo a Futeca, pero jamás informaron que las integrantes eran ejecutivas de la profesión más antigua del mundo, pues sabían perfectamente que no las hubieran aceptado.

Having said this, this episode did not begin spontaneously. The promoters of "Estrellas" went to register the team with Futeca, but they never said that the team members were practitioners of the world's oldest profession, knowing full well that they would not be accepted.

She is right that the women are ripe for exploitation, caught in the double-bind of poverty and illiteracy. The women earn as little as \$2.50 per client. Yet by forswearing silence they expose themselves to ridicule. Some media outlets, such as the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, see fit to mention the women's plight as part of the "lighter side of sports," under the headline "Working Girls." Thankfully, **Claudia Virginia Samayoa** of *Siglo Veintiuno* provides a corrective ("**La resistencia a ser cocinadas**," 27 September): "You cannot imagine the levels of discrimination and abuse the sex servants must survive."

The Estrellas with their actions have also brought attention to the shocking totals of women who have been murdered in Guatemala—more than 1,300 since 2001 (see **Nick Caistor**, "**Prostitutes Play the Beautiful Game**," BBC News, 30 October). The Organization of American States special representative laments that violence against women receives such little notice in traditional societies like Guatemala's. The Estrellas' media-aware advocacy thus seems all the more surprising, as when player **Vilma Martinez** notes the difference between appearances and reality in the sex workers' lives.

We put on makeup, get dressed up and laugh a lot—that's what the people see.  
How many of the people who discriminate against us know what it feels like when  
we shut the doors of our rooms and have sex with someone we don't want?