Towards a radical feminist change: the empowerment of survivors from prostitution, transgression of normativities and the abolition of power differences.

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Abstract

This dissertation is an attempt to illustrate the role of a feminist and abolitionist organization towards the enhancement of women’s social conditions and their representation in society. The study is based on my three months training at an Icelandic organization, Stígamót, which is an “Education and Counselling Centre for Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Violence”. My stay there included a series of interviews with social workers and survivors of prostitution and sexual trafficking. The centre has a multi-faceted approach, using feminist empowerment as a methodological process for the purpose of increasing the quality of life. Together with feminist theories on intersectionality and empowerment as methodological tools, I am researching the relations between survivors’ empowerment, their agency, with a radical political change, leading to gender-equal society.

Key words: Prostitution- Survivors – Empowerment- agency- Political change – Equal-society – Feminist- Abolitionism.
Introduction

Having as a starting point an Icelandic feminist and abolitionist organization Stígamót that works with and for women exposed to men’s violence is inspiring since many years of grass-roots activities including sheltering, counselling, advocacy, self-help groups, education campaigns, and political negotiations. Stígamót has implemented empowerment-process tools among survivors of sexual abuses, including prostitution, and has subsequently developed a strong advocacy for change covering social representation of women, power differentials, deconstruction of normativities and other initiatives.

In this thesis, I will focus on Stígamót counselling/therapy sessions as the basis of their entire work; I will thus reflect on that strategy. I will not discuss again the pros and cons in detail since these have already been discussed in many ways, however, I will briefly approach the debate in a later chapter. As a preference, I will argue for an intersectional approach to prostitution and the use of post-structuralism deconstructionism to analyse Stígamót’ strategy and the survivors’ agency. I chose to base my analytical approach on transdisciplinary methodologies, mirroring the methods used at Stígamót. Stígamót organizes its work in processual steps and are inspired by their first line job, the counselling work, which is based on psychology, social reflections. They then proceed to the understanding of the individual living in a specific societal/political system, which is itself based on sociological analysis, while the global understanding of the interconnection of the societal, political and personal strands, find their roots with both sociological and philosophical approaches.

I have collected five Icelandic survivors’ testimonies, six social workers’ experiences related to sexual violence with an emphasis on prostitution and the views of one detective inspector from the Organized Crime Division in Reykjavik. The testimonies of both the survivors from prostitution and social workers from Stígamót are a major source of inspiration for the development of this master thesis. And I will critically reflect on the affirmative aspects of Stígamót abolitionist political movement towards the full implementation of the law that criminalizes the purchase of sexual services which tends to induce a gender equal society and the end of violence against women. Indeed, as Kajsa Claude, expert in human rights stated, “in a gender-equal society, men do not regard women as merchandise” the gender-equal “legislation is gender-neutral; the buyer and seller can be both women and men, however, the demand focuses on women and children and the sex-buyers are typically men” (Claude 2011: 6). Clearly, the sexual practices business creates a gender imbalance which imply power differential between the
sexes. Moreover, such a practice embedded in many myths engendering generalizations, as stated by the European Women’s Lobby reporting on the quantity of approving discourses on prostitution such as “Prostitution is the oldest Profession in the world.”, “it is a choice.” “Prostitution is useful for society, especially for socially isolated and lonely men.”¹. All these myths are constitutive of symbolic representations that perpetuate the social practices by creating generalizations about prostitution, and hence normalize it. This normalization of the practice of prostitution renders the possibility to rationalize the identification to that particular social practice, in its various forms, such as that practised in massage parlours, saunas, private flats, street prostitution and escort prostitution. Each form of prostitution is available to the ‘client’ according his social class position, i.e. the rich, celebrities or powerful people will not chose street prostitution which is the cheapest, but for the more discrete. They will identify easier to the high standard of prostitution such as escorts and rationalize their behaviour saying among other justifications that it is a well paid job and that is the woman’s choice. By their rationalization, they render the practice ‘normal’.

Intersectional theory/methodology is a valuable tool to show the embedment of domination, violence, gender, sexuality in prostitution, maintained by misogynist political manifestation accompanied by sexualised violence. Indeed, each intersections embedded into prostitution are intra-acting therefore are transforming each and every element with which they are intersecting (Lykke 2010:78). I aim to demonstrate that prostitution as a social phenomena created by the intersections of other elements such as violence, power differential, etc. The abolition of prostitution, a change of actual power differential and the end of violence, require an intersectional vision as well. Moreover, the use of intersectional theory, allows me to understand the intra-actions of elements used in the context of Stígamót’s work towards a society free of violence. Actually, the politics of Stígamót use intersectionality as well by trying to put the interlink of empowerment-agency, survivors and equality into practice in order to invoke change at individual meanwhile political and societal level.

My master thesis is a qualitative research mainly based on interviews with staff and survivors at Stígamót. The qualitative material constitutes the base of my investigations.

I argue that the empowerment process will drive people, precisely the survivors I met at Stígamót, to make sense of their lives and the norms into which they were entangled and driven into prostitution. Indeed, creating a meaning of the categories and norms they were stuck in everyday life, give them sense and develop their inner power, power over their surroundings, power over their situations and power to change, in other words develop their empowerment which leads to their agency.

Aims and Research Question

Many organizations work towards women’s empowerment, among these are Rescue International\(^2\), Care International\(^3\), and Roks Sweden\(^4\). Stígamót being another, does amazing and valuable work to empower survivors of prostitution, using the experience of women as a mean to develop strategies towards the enhancement of a gender-equal society. With this thesis I aim to understand how people come to develop a new perspective on themselves and society, and I aim to challenge the goals of empowerment and emphasise its processual use for the individual process of empowerment impacting on societal changes.

Stígamót is not a shelter but an Education and Counselling Centre for Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Violence that attempts to ‘empower’ survivors. The term survivor is used to avoid passivity and blockage in ‘victim role’, and the term is given to individuals who have experienced any sexual abuse including prostitution; the notion of survivor itself is empowering. On the contrary, the victim term confines a person to a position of need, making them dependant.

I will thus examine how Stígamót use survivors’ empowerment and link this to a radical process for policy changes of gender and sexuality and thereby challenge the societal and cultural norms regarding sexuality and gender roles.

I chose to connect both empowerment and survivors of prostitution, which is something rarely done. Indeed, empowerment is usually used as a goal in order “to have control over the determinants of one’s quality of life” (Tengland P-A. 2008:77) this is widespread in the development sector and international institution, as we will see later in this chapter. Empowerment is seldom used as a process in order to “create a professional relation where the client or community takes control over the process of change, determining both the goals of this process and the means to use” (Tengland P-A. 2008:77). The use of this process is observed in a

\(^2\) http://www.rescue.org/our-work/gender-based-violence-programs
\(^3\) http://www.care.org/work/womens-empowerment/violence-against-women
\(^4\) http://www.roks.se/about-roks-1
social work context and mostly among feminists. In my chosen context: Stígamót, empowerment is used as process which is not operating chronologically, rather, each empower element influences each another and intra-act continuously.

Thus, empowerment is used as reinforcement of survivors’ self-esteem and their capacity to act, make decisions, engage with social/ political structures in order to generate a change and contribute to their agency. The agency operates on both social workers and survivors, it impulses a new dynamism to civil society awareness, and a change in political discourses at both national and international level. According to feminist researcher Judith Butler, the appropriation survivors instead of victim, perpetrators instead of client, and the penalization of the perpetrator for their crime, are a language that transgresses the actual practices of cultures/ societies (1990: 26).

Starting from Stígamót work and expertise, I would like to research and understand how this organization working with survivors of sexual violence has developed strategies and provokes changes in their country. I investigated how, from counselling work with survivors, the staff members and volunteers are improving the living conditions of women in Iceland and abroad, pushing the norms, deconstructing the stereotypes and implementing gender-equality ‘ideology’. My first interrogation would be about the understanding of empowerment and intersectionality of elements such as behaviour, norms, beliefs, etc. their process and aims, I will elaborate further on both concepts in the chapter ‘previous studies’. As such, my first hypothesis is that the empowerment will lead in a bottom-up process and operates modification in the societal values such as the representation of women and the ‘use’ of prostitution therefore changes the normative of intersections. Based on the understanding of the women intersecting with empowerment, inducing a transformation of the social/cultural/political system, the question which is going to lead my research is:

*How an abolitionist organization works with survivors’ empowerment to the enhancement of a gender-equal society?*

To that, I should first understand: *how does Stígamót, based on their experiences, develop ideas such as change and equality and how do they manifest these changes?*

To formulate answering elements I will base my analysis on the understanding of the narratives on prostitution related to the experiences and agency among staff members and survivors in the organization. The questions which will contribute to answering the research question are: How
do individuals mobilise empowerment from their experience? How does Stígamót participate in the enhancement of gender equality in Icelandic society? How is gender equality viewed at Stígamót?

**Personal reflection:**

**Position at Stígamót**

Being at Stígamót, my positions have always permeated from inside to outside and from personal to professional: at the shelter I was on the ‘inside’ by living part time with the residents, interacting in their daily life, talking to them. So I had an insider position since I was staying at the shelter for a specific period of time, sharing activities as if I lived there. On the other hand, I had an ‘outside’ position related to the staff members and volunteers’ work, since I had to write a report at the end of each shift by giving my perception regarding residents’ behaviour, taking part in some meetings to discuss the inhabitants and their progress.

Being in contact with staff members from Stígamót, I could go further with the understanding of prostitution and trafficking (at national and international level). Regarding the counselling work of Stígamót, I had an intertwined position through my personal counselling sessions. Indeed, I could understand and experience as an outsider how their methodology functions, and how it works for people since I experienced it first-hand. I took my personal issues as a sexually abused child as a privilege in the sense that I could observe as an outsider and feel as an insider how sexual abuse and prostitution are closely related in terms of side effects, particularly mental consequences. This double position made me feel vulnerable while at the same time being in control of the situation; to share survivors’ pain and being able to offer support and encouragement.

As such, I feel an interaction between two entities, myself and something else. As Edyta Just mentioned in a lecture, “be prepared to find something new”. An assemblage between conscious and unconscious, between myself and others, in “a constant creation, in a process of embodiment of changes” (cf. lecture with Edyta Just, 12/03/13).

Personally, gradually I had been able to understand new situations, make new assemblages and prepare myself to gather enough material to be able to reflect upon and allow a new understanding emerge in the future.

Here is a concrete example of understanding, it is about the usefulness of counselling for survivors and how complementary it was with the lobbyism activities of the organization.
Indeed, the counselling sessions develop the survivors’ self-confidence and they enter into a process of becoming. Meanwhile, the staff undertakes its becoming process by gaining a wider vision regarding the various realities of sexual abuses, prostitution and traffic. The experience and empowerment of survivors generate something new and nourish the staff members’ ideas to develop a powerful lobbyism subsequently invoking a change in the society. Everything is interconnected, moving at different levels/pace, their assemblage induces endless processes of becoming at both individual and societal level.

I can appreciate how counselling and working on the front line matter for the advocacy. How each woman’s individual experience is valuable to map new ideas, and to always go further in researching, improving, understanding and changing the actual and stratified context in relation to sexual abuse. The multiplicity and diverse experiences encountered help the staff to always be re-questioning, re-positioning, themselves.

**Mixing personal and scientific perceptions**

I chose to write this paragraph, but also the whole thesis according to “epistemological tradition in Feminist Studies” (Lykke 2010:4), taking into account US feminist professor Donna Haraway’s politics of location and English writer Virginia Woolf’s claim for truth: “Truth will give it authority; from its narrow limits he will get shape and intensity; and then there is no more fitting place for some of those ornaments which the old writers loved” (Woolf, 2004:2).

Following Haraway; “within the field of Feminist Studies, all production of knowledge is to be understood as located-or ‘situated’. (Lykke 2010:4) […] Haraway’s articulation of the principle of situated knowledge is based on a critique of what she calls the ‘god-trick’ of positivist epistemology (Haraway 1991c in Lykke 2010:4). With the term ‘god-trick’ she refers to the scientific belief in a faceless, bodiless and knower without context, who can detach her/himself from the world and the objects of study, and then form an aloof and elevated position of surveillance, producing objective knowledge. According to Haraway, the ‘god-trick’ is an illusion” (ibid.).

The ‘situatedness knowledge’ will be further discussed in the chapter ‘Empirical data and interview methods, yet accordingly, and in order to make myself an “ethico-politically responsible, democratic player” (Lykke 2010:6), I state my personal, bodily and historical position. As a survivor of twelve years of incestuous sexual abuses the choice for researching in the field of sexual abuse is not insignificant, indeed, my personal background awoke my interest and passion to understand the political organization of the field. Referenced by a Belgian feminist activist, applying as a trainee at Stígamót was an opportunity to learn about tools needed to heal the consequences of sexual abuse but most important to me was how the survivors could develop agency an thereby use their ‘expertise’ to change the legislation and influence a radical
change in social behaviour and habits. I would have focused on sexual abuses in general but I decided to zoom into the ‘field’ of sexual abuse and concentrate on prostitution, which is a ‘hot’ topic currently, with discussions taking place worldwide, questioning the Dutch and Swedish ‘model’ (I will discuss in detail the legislation in a later chapter).

I would say that my personal situation helped me to enter the field; therefore the consequences of sexual abuse and prostitution are similar. I considered this position and related experience as a privilege somehow since I believe I had developed an empathy with the confidence of my participants. This position dismissed any sense of intrusion in women’s life while I was asking about their story, indeed, while listening to them I felt similarities with most of their experiences, and evoked in me a feeling of: “I am not alone”.

While I was with them I initially thought that I should ask them questions whose answers could generate an academic explanation of the consequences of sexual abuse and the process of escaping from it. Further, I developed questions and the scope of my study then problematised the field and eventually reached my research question. I can confirm that my personal experience increased my understanding of the field further; the analytical, theoretical and political dimensions of the research ‘universe’ allowed me to reach a certain form of distance from my personal story and the analysis, therefore developing a global understanding of the interrelation intrinsic to that field.

Additionally, having been in counselling at Stígamót myself, I gathered an insider’s perspective on their method. This trainee at Stígamót has been doubling empowering, first for the inner-empowerment I lived and also the external-empowerment through contact, common work towards a shared aim: the participation at interviews and analytical production.

My personal experience obviously influenced my political stance but also my feminist activist position in the Belgian context, it led me to reflect upon prostitution and its pros and cons. I came to take an abolitionist position linked to societal and personal reasons. Indeed, I believe even though people have the freedom of property for their own body which means being able to sell it if wanted, I still believe that the decision to sell their body or not is well based on choices which can be fairly limited due to the person them self, including their socio-economic-cultural situation.

Moreover, I argue that taking a personal ‘choice’, which can have very negative impact on many other people, is a individualistic choice based on a patriarchal and neo-liberalism philosophy. Indeed, the choice to sell their body and to advocate in this way can benefit 10% of the people involved in the market while destroying the lives of the 90% of others forced to be in the sex
trade. With this notion of choice I critically reflect on the will for solidarity or the perpetuation of individualistic practices.

I strongly believe in the UN convention of 1949, which states "Whereas prostitution and the accompanying evil of the traffic in persons for the purpose of prostitution are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and endanger the welfare of the individual, the family and the community" (UN Treaty series 1951, No. 1342). Adding to that, even with ‘consent’, selling others human being’s sexual services is considered a crime:

“The Parties to the present Convention agree to punish any person who, to gratify the passions of another : 1) procures, entices or leads away, for purposes of prostitution, another person, even with the consent of that person; 2) Exploits the prostitution of another person, even with the consent of that person” (UN Treaty series 1951, No 1342, article 1).

Swedish politics went further in 1999 with a law which criminalises the buyer of sexual services, sanctioning the buyer and not the prostitute. Sweden was the first country to 1) declare that prostitution is violence against women; 2) to integrate this declaration into their political and legislatives actions ‘for women’s peace’. According to the former Swedish minister of gender equality affairs, Margareta Winberg, considering a person as merchandise, even with their consent, is a crime (Winberg 2002).

I intend to focus on women’s perceptions, their needs, and their process of becoming in order to observe, on a post-structuralism view, the way their empowerment impacts on a society shared by both men and women. I mention post-structuralism vision, since my result will not reflect the essential truth; rather many other understandings of the analysis may be generated. Therefore, I stand by the Butler argument against the fixation and mechanisms of exclusion that are interwoven in a definition of scholarly object of study (in Lykke 2013: 33). All the definitions of object of research concern my personal position during the time I am in the process of writing; since I am in a process, I am sure, my initial ideas will evolve with time; for this reason, I argue that each reader might find different explanations, conclusions according to their situation at the moment.

**Contextualizing the organization: Stígamót**

In feminist belief, the main force is not to look at women who have been victims of sexual violence as vulnerable or sick individuals, rather as individuals who have survived threatening violence and have consequently created great strength. Furthermore, we believe that the responses of individuals of sexual violence and its consequences on their lives are normal reactions to abnormal situations. Working at Stígamót encourages individuals to be aware of their own strengths, helping them to use it to change their own life and see the violence in the social context and not as personal shortcomings. Furthermore, we believe that the people seeking help from...
Stígamót are "experts". That is to say; no one knows the consequences of sexual violence better than someone who has been subjected to it. We are committed to creating equitable relationships and intimacy between social workers and those seeking assistance. Efforts are made to reflect these ideas in all activities of Stígamót, whether in the case of individual counselling or group work (Stígamót report 2013:4).

The Stígamót organization is an “Education and Counselling Centre for Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Violence” (Stígamót website 10/04/14). Nowadays, in a country that has adopted legislation which criminalises the purchase of sex, Stígamót is working at a national and international level; the centre employs eight women and many volunteers.

The international level is mainly based on exchanges about Nordic, European and international policies and trends, it allows them to collect, at a global level, statistical information on violence. The Stígamót centre gives conferences about their practices and observations in both the academic and activist field, members are also invited to share their knowledge about sexual violence, Stígamót strategies attempt to tackle violence against women and include the Icelandic strategy to achieve gender equality at a high level sphere such as the UN and the European parliament (Stígamót annual Report 2013: 16, 25).

Their National work is based on their counselling, self-help groups, Swan group sessions which support women to get out of prostitution. The Swan-group⁵ is a therapeutic model which was created in 2005 by Danish Dorit Otzen, this group is exclusively organized for women who wish to leave prostitution or have left, the group has the same dynamic as the self-help group which are for survivors of sexual abuse in a broader sense, the Swan group is jointly led by a counsellor and survivor, it is oriented toward the recovery of self-esteem, and empowerment in general (Stígamót annual report 2013:4-9). Mobile counselling sessions are also coordinated around the island so the people who cannot come to the capital Reykjavik, can seek help as well (ibid.). Stígamót had also run a shelter for two years; this pilot project was mainly supporting women on their way out of prostitution and human trafficking. To strengthen their expertise, Stígamót has established close collaborations with mental institutions, prisons, other shelters and Icelandic women associations, schools, a centre for disabled people, etc. (Stígamót annual report 2013: 8-13). Based on their diversified practices, each year the women at Stígamót collect material based on their activities to develop a global understanding of the sexual violence in their country and in relation to the world; hence Stígamót has developed a strong political intervention in order to stop violence, increase education, enhance both the resources for victims and societal regulation (Stígamót annual report 2013: 32-33).

⁵ More details can be found in Camilla Gohr, « the Swan Groups, an evaluation of the swan group with a focus on the participant experience », March 2012.
With experience and the collection of 24 years of intern statistical information based on completed questionnaires completed during counselling, accordingly Stígamót claims they have gained an extensive knowledge about gender-based violence (Stígamót annual report 2013: 34). Noticeably, becoming a key reference in Iceland regarding sexual violence, Stígamót has a consultative position for media, politicians, and other organizations related to the field of sexual violence (Stígamót annual report 2013: 13-18).

**Responding prostitution**

At their outset, Stígamót caught the population’s attention via its counselling work and information provided on sexual violence such as rape, and paedophilia. From the interviews with counsellors I learned that after years of debates in public media, Icelanders could acknowledge the presence of those crimes in their country which offer Stígamót the opportunity to bring up new issues such as prostitution (SWI.T.5.18). Since the debates are still new, about 5 years, Icelanders are still working on the full acknowledgement of prostitution in their country, further will come trafficking. It is with years of work and various first-line experiences, media coverage, negotiation with politicians, that Stígamót is expanding its activities, communication and struggles (SWI.T.5.19). Regarding prostitution specifically, Stígamót philosophy is that any kind of buying or selling of people in the sex-industry is a form of gender-based violence (Stígamót, annual report 2013:9). To respond to the problem at individual level, they have the counselling sessions, however prostitution is often a hidden topic and sometimes it is talked about years after having started counselling, indeed, prostitution is still a taboo subject in Iceland and a shame for the survivors (from both survivors –SI.5a.65 and counsellors interview- SWI.AT.2.10). In 2013, 706 people (men and women) went to Stígamót for diverse reasons among which were rape, incest, prostitution, sexual harassment, etc. In its annual report of 2013, the data compiled from participant questionnaires, shows that 323 individuals found assistance for the first time and only 12 women sought help for the first time this year for prostitution and 11 women have followed them from the previous year for prostitution as well (Stígamót, annual report 2013: 33-61). When the issue of prostitution is raised in counselling, people have the opportunity to participate in swan group sessions and share their experiences with other women and work on specific topics such as the sex life, childhood, adolescent years, etc. in order to strengthen confidence, self esteem and work out the effect that prostitution may entail (Stígamót, annual report 2013: 9). In 2013, there was one swan group and in that group were five women who participated. There was also one group in 2014, in which there were four women who participated (staff member email 28/07/2014).

The Shelter, Kristina House was held from September 2011 to December 2013 and welcomed 27
women and 8 children in two years (Stígamót, annual report 2013: 10-11). Kristina House was a place for women who were on their way out of prostitution, trafficking or other forms of sexual violence, there they have been offered accommodation, security and help to work through the consequences and rebuild their lives. The shelter was well known and referenced by the police, social services and health care, many work collaborations were made in order to provide the women with an adequate response to their needs (ibid.).

Kristina house is the place where I was volunteering for 3 months during the summer of 2013. There, with other volunteers, I took part in the women’s daily lives, gave them support and listening. During my shifts, I also guaranteed the security of the house and answered the phone.

The material I gathered comprises of interviews of women living at Kristina house, volunteers, and participants of the swan group. All of the participants have had experience with prostitution and some for trafficking.

**Empirical and methodological considerations**

**Material**

My empirical material fits into an abolitionist context which is based upon the criminalisation of sex buyers aiming at the prevention and fight against prostitution and sexual trafficking. My grass-roots sources are the exploitation of the empirical data I gathered during my internship at the Stígamót organization in Reykjavik, Iceland, from June 2013 to September 2013 where I made field observations and conducted interviews. The core of my material will be both five Icelandic survivors’ voices, six social workers’ experiences related to sexual violence with an emphasis on prostitution and one Detective Inspector from the Organized Crime Division in Reykjavik.

**Interview as Method**

**The interviews**

Hearing a personal story has a powerful impact on the interviewer, both the survivors and Stigamót’s staff interviews gave me a lot of strength, it makes me realise what women have been through and how strong a human being can be in a resiliency process; also it makes me recognize how prostitution is devastating, how social services, economical issues and the society influence people in different ways. Through the interviews, I realized how important and useful an organization such as Stígamót is.
My sample was homogeneous by experience related to prostitution; all were female except the police officer. Each interviewee, with their position and experience, supported and developed each other.

I began interviewing all the survivors chronologically, then I interviewed the staff members and at the end a Detective Inspector. This order was actually useful because, after having interviewed the survivors, I had the possibility to adjust the questionnaire of the social worker in order to strengthen the material I had already gathered, or to ask about something that was missing or about their perspective on some aspects of the answers received previously with the survivors. This chronology was also useful in the sense that I could have, through the counsellor, an ‘outside’ perception on the ‘inside’ perception lived by the survivors themselves. After the collection of data from both survivors and counsellors, I sought to inform myself on the juridical part of the stories, such as the concrete procedure to report a buyer or an abuse that occurred in prostitution milieu. I also wanted to learn among other questions, the percentage of women who had dared to report a client since the law had been passed four years previous and, how many clients were sentenced. To achieve this I requested a meeting with a police officer and a city counsellor, I only managed to meet with the Detective Inspector from the organized crime division. This meeting was quite difficult to organise and unfortunately, I did not meet the person responsible for prostitution affairs who collaborates with Stígamót, the Inspector I met gave me an overview of the Icelandic situation from the view of the police.

**Structure of the interview**

I used semi-structured interviews, which allows that the “interviewed subject’s viewpoint are more likely to be expressed in a relatively openly designed interview situation than in a standardized interview or questionnaire”. (Flick, 2002:74) My questionnaire had also the role of an interview guide. (The questionnaire for survivors and social workers, see annex 1.1 resp. annex 1.2). Through the interview, I wanted to learn about their process of recovery and their life as a survivor, thus I started the interview sessions by presenting a sheet stating the aim of the interview and the questionnaire. This first question was open and helped me to assess the participant, it was a guide to orientate and adapt the questionnaire myself and the interview process according to the flow of the answers given. The openness was used to let the participants create the context and make self-revelations while avoiding interference and influence on my part as the interviewer. The ‘middle section’ questions were more guided, they were structured to help me keep a sort of coherence towards my questions marks related to the research aim. Finally, I ended the interview by asking about the near future and further goals of the
This last question was open, and gave an opportunity for the participant to express anything they wished to add.

For the Social Worker and Detective Inspector, the structure of the interview was slightly different, I did not give them any paper however, when I requested an appointment via e-mail, I also sent the aim of my project to inform them about my purpose and overall questions. I used a guide of questions to conduct my interview, thus the interview was semi-structured so the discussion was mostly open and the interview was based on intuitive questions which followed the flow of answers.

Regarding the context of the interviews, all of them took place at Kristina House or at Stígamót; it was thus a well-known context where both the survivors and social worker felt at ease. Even if it was a working place for some, the atmosphere was relaxed since each office has its own lounge. Regarding the interview with the Inspector, it was conducted at his office.

Concerning the language, we all used English as a second language. I would say that the language barrier always brings me back to the reality that I was a stranger. Indeed, they often spoke English however, when approaching too sensitive a subject it was easier for them to express their feelings in their mother tongue Icelandic and it was not easy for me to express all the things I wanted to. Therefore, language breaks the emphasis on ‘subjectivity’, indeed, nothing could be taken for granted since understanding of subtlety on a daily basis was bias, in the sense that all of us were using English as second language or their mother tongue I did not have access to. Moreover, three months is not enough to perceive routine and make ‘self-evidence’ interpretation.

**Entering and leaving the field**

Before starting the training at Stígamót, I had not deeply learned about the organization and its actions; I wanted to experience the Stígamót exploration without having any preconception or expectation. Even so, my previous activist work gave me a good background in the subject of prostitution, trafficking, legislations, and the pros and cons, I did not know much about how to approach survivors. Stígamót was therefore my first contact and understanding of the milieu, in relation to women who were, or have been in prostitution.

Having started my training at the shelter called Kristina House on the 15th of June 2013 and the interviews the 21st of August 2013, I had two months to meet the women, gain their confidence and feel confident enough to suggest interview participation to them. In some points I could say
that my presence at Kristina House was fairly ‘unquestioned and taken for granted’ (Schütz 1962 in Flick 2002) - from the staff members, volunteers and the residents of the house. By coming several days a week to take my shifts I was well accepted and received confidences and was even invited to parties in the house, such as birthdays. In total agreement with the statement by feminist researcher Gayle Letherby, my position as a volunteer at Kristina House “improved my rapport with the women I was researching” (2003:109), hence the quality of the material they provided me with.

I met three interviewees at the Kristina House shelter, two of whom were volunteering there and one was living-in. I met the two other participants through a volunteer who participated at the interview. After her interview, she talked to other women who were together in the swan group and asked them if they wanted to meet me to give me their testimonies. I think these two women, who did not know me, accepted to participate on behalf of the recommendation of the volunteer. So in total I interviewed five survivors of prostitution.

During these two months of the inclusion process, I had opportunities to make some field observations to steer the elaboration of the interview’s questionnaire. Regarding the questionnaire, I also requested the suggestion of the ‘oldest’ volunteer-survivor in its elaboration, indeed, I didn’t want to be intrusive and I also wanted to be fully respectful towards the women. Moreover, requesting the advice of that particular survivor-volunteer, who has an implicit ‘mother role’ towards the other survivors and the volunteer, makes me feel confident since her participation gave a ‘trusting’ dimension to my questionnaire in the sense that I could not be wrong at targeting questions since she had the knowledge and could validated my requests.

Regarding “power, empowerment and ‘emancipatory research” (Letherby 2003:114); the power relation between me as the researcher and my participants might have been low indeed, the women looked quite relaxed. Indeed, the context at Stígamót engenders a feeling that people are equal and valuable through their experience; feminist sociologist, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise “argue that as researchers we should make ourselves vulnerable and try to ‘equalize’ our relationship with respondents” (Stanley and Wise 1993 in Letherby 2003:114) I actually presented myself as someone inexperienced, which I really was, both social workers and survivors taught me a lot about prostitution’s survivors and the empowerment process. However, I acknowledge that analyzing people’s words and making them fit into the apparatus of scientific reliability is entangled in power relations since I have power beyond the research.

That “giving people a chance to talk about an experience which is often ‘taboo’ can bring forward vulnerable people who may ‘give away’ more (both substantively and emotionally) than...
they later feel comfortable with” (Letherby, 2003:111). Accordingly, and regarding words from the survivors, I argue that inviting survivors to take part in interviews became in one way part of their empowerment process as well. As one of the interviewed women at Stígamót said: “I don’t know how it benefitted me, maybe it made me feel better about myself and my story has a purpose” (S.FB.K. S1) “Just telling your story, it helps” (S.2a.37). None of my participants were victims; actually, both they and I recognized their position of survivors including the recognition of their strength, will, determination, intelligence and power. They could acknowledge the same by saying: “Yes, totally, it is unbelievable that I am still alive after everything I have been through, so I am a survivor” (S.4A.17); “I am a survivor because I was sexually abused when I was a little girl… then I was raped when I was teenager, and hey… everything went very wrong after all this.” (S.2A.36).

To complete the field, the time was limited to one hour with the six social workers so I was a good time keeper. I was so grateful that they agreed to ‘insert’ me in their overbooked schedule that I, out of respect, wanted to finish and close the interview on time. However, we did not have a strict agreement on time with the survivors, and I ended the interview when I felt that I had enough material regarding their empowerment and experience with prostitution. Since my feelings were highly subjective, and they knew the aim of my research, I always asked them if they had something to add or clarify, which three of the five did.

At the end of each interview I was so thankful and amazed by their experiences and achievements that I felt I had to congratulate the survivors. All of them expressed a good feeling at the end of the interview.

**The transcribing**

In order to make use of my interview and generate material for the analysis I decided to transcribe part or complete interviews. To follow the same chronological order as for conducting the interviews, I started to transcribe survivors’ contributions following with the social workers’. To repeat myself, the survivors input guided the analytical process.

For the survivors, I transcribed the recorded interviews, then reading their stories carefully from the transcriptions and grouping themes and activities together to create ‘codes’ which helped me. Such an index made possible to find statements easily. The other main purpose of coding was to sort the ‘codes’ by ‘themes’ or similarity. For example, I classified food disorder, alcoholism, attempt of suicide under ‘Consequences of prostitution’. I could then observe that one type of code such as suicide could be placed under a different theme. For example, suicide could be
found in consequences of prostitution or in consequences of sexual abuse in childhood. The classification under theme shows me the varied human reaction to trauma and their empowerment. It also become clear to me that there was an interconnection of some themes, such as sexual abuse in childhood and prostitution, even if the five participants were completely different, had different backgrounds and did not necessarily know each other, all the codes I identified were for most of the participants, similar.

The ‘coding’ also provides me with indicators on “how individual subjects negotiate the power-laden social relation” (Lykke, 2010:51). I could observe that while in prostitution it was about disempowerment, shame, the inability to speak up, to say no, to make strategic choice (Kabeer, 2001: 23), etc. However, while getting out of prostitution and being ready to work through the experience, it is about empowerment and the behaviours that go along such as being confident, talking to relatives, using their experience, etc.

Regarding social worker participation, I transcribed the most relevant information according to my previously gathered codes and themes in survivors’ participation, but also in order to meet my research question’s key words: empowerment of survivors and gender-equal society. Obviously, some parts transcribed were selected in relation to the theory and development of my analysis.

**Ethical Consideration**

In order to gain interviews with the women who were living at Kristina House, I had to follow a procedure and send a formal request to Stígamót for approval. The request, signed by each participant, included the explanation of my research, stated that quotations would be anonymous and recorded. I also included the questionnaire in this form.

When I asked people to participate I just gave the sheet as an explanation, then they had the time to think about participating or not. For those who did not want to participate, I did not ask for any explanation since that was their choice. Also, I told them it would be entirely possible to withdraw their participation afterwards, modify something or add elements. During the writing process, I have contacted each of them to ask if they wanted to re-read the dissertation.

Regarding the anonymity, for both social worker and survivor, I never make use of names, instead I replace them by letters and numbers, and that allow me to easily find the quotations in my records, accordingly, the survivors contributions reference start with an ‘S’ and the social worker one start with ‘SW’. I also avoid stating specific details which make them recognizable.
such as the number of children, the place where abuse took place, with whom, etc. To that end, because I did not want to modify the narration I just avoided stating the quotations in the analysis when some were to obvious in order to recognize a person. Regarding the Detective Inspector, I decide to mention his participation even if I did not use his testimony in the research; he might recognize himself, since he was the only one who testified, however, I haven’t indicated any names so it cannot be that easy to determine who that person is.

**Research situatedness**

Returning to the politics of location, previously introduced in ‘personal position chapter’ and, illustrated by Haraway and her claim for a “situated knowledge” (Lykke 2010: 4-6), here is the statement of further critiques approached by Lykke, followed by my position toward the ethnographic material I will use in this dissertation.

It has been claimed by some post-modern thinkers, that science is about objectivity excluding relativism which itself might lead the researcher out of any ethical consideration. Others argue that science is “nothing than stories and that no criteria can define why one story is better or worse than another” (Lykke 2010:5). Going further than these opposite thoughts, Haraway suggests that we as researchers can only work on the elements we have at our disposal: “the researcher, through conscious reflection of her or his situatedness and her or his research technologies, can obtain a partially objective knowledge, that is, a knowledge of the specific part of reality that she or he can ‘see’ from the position in which she or he is materially discursively located in time, space, body and historical power relations.” (Lykke 2010: 5). Accordingly, the post-modern researcher ought to reflect on its own position of location and its perspective to understand its localization; Haraway explains that our localization and our perception are always in relation to the elements we already know, hence allows the researcher to reflect on what is available to them - a partial reality. (Lykke 2010:6).

Since reflecting on sex and its practices is a vast subject, in relation to what has been stated above and to specify the scope of study and narrowing it down to the context I was confronted with in Iceland, my research will focus on my ethnographic material: women, ex-prostitutes, who only had had male clients, in a political frame where prostitution is abolished, meaning that the clients are criminalised.

Regarding my position as a researcher in Feminist/Gender studies, I am opposed to prostitution and promote the law that prohibits the purchase of sexual ‘services’. I am therefore struggling for women’s freedom and pleasure, free of any commercial affair; free of sexual harassment. I
appeal for solidarity among women and girls. Obviously, if some women have deliberately chosen to work as prostitutes, the vast majority have been forced to enter the sex industry, the other women, not directly involved in the sexual market, are facing the consequences of misogyny, objectification of women bodies, harassments, violence, and so on. This radical feminist position is urging men to take their responsibilities regarding their sexuality, values and human rights.

In addition, this research is not an attempt to debate further on the pros and cons, attempting to let a ‘truth’ emerge, rather, it tends to be a tool or reference for some who seek to evaluate and reconsider the importance of using empowerment of survivors of prostitution as agency tool for a gender equal society. Acknowledging that gender, sex, prostitution and even empowerment are social constructs, consequently, some construction has been designed to counter the effects of others, for example; empowerment has been discursively constructed in order to balance the consequences of women’s disempowerment.

Such society, in this particular context, induces a state which takes a strong position, with legislation that prohibits the purchase of sex, persecuting the clients. In opposition to the regulation law where women in prostitution were targeted, here, it is a matter of male clients and their sexual behaviour. Indeed, even if the struggle of gender equality is based on grass roots feminist movements, to achieve a balance between men and women, participation by men is needed, and by free will or by force they have to change their vision on the possession of another’s body.

To orientate my research, being inspired and ensuring that I am not analyzing a subject that has been previously studied with similar material, analysis objectives and methodologies, I therefore resume below previous researches that most resemble mine. The resemblance is evaluated according to the empirical material: survivors of prostitution, the objectives which tend to demonstrate the link between empowerment and an enhancement of gender equal society and the methodologies such as the use of intersectionality.

**Previous Research**

All the empowerment studies I am relating have a connection to at least one of the following labels: feminism, women, survivor, sexual assault, and prostitution.
Not many studies have been done about Stígamót available in English or French, I have not looked at other languages such as Icelandic or other Scandinavian languages since I do not understand them and the internet translation is inaccurate. However, this centre is well known at least in Nordic and European feminist abolitionist movements such as: the Brussels call, the European Women’s Lobby, the Nordic forum, Nordic Women against violence, Nordic Women’s shelter and so on (Stígamót annual report 2013: 25-31).

To gather previous researches concerning my study, I am focusing on ethnographic researches of survivors’ empowerment of prostitution or sexual assault. Below, I exemplify both the researches achieved in the development sector and from independent scholars.

**Empowerment and prostitution in previous studies**

According to Naila Kabeer, the Professor of Gender and Development at the Gender Institute in the UK, most studies attempt to measure empowerment such as the level of poverty is measured, some others have been done on the feminist empowerment philosophy and its application in organizations and social sectors (Kabeer 2001: 18). I would say that few researches have been achieved on the empowerment process of survivors from prostitution including its impact towards a gender-equal society.

Empowerment and survivors of prostitution have been randomly connected together in academic researches. Nevertheless, empowerment is broadly used as a goal, particularly in the context of development agencies where sanitary measures as an aim is advanced and the link is made for social environment enhancement such as Social Work scholars Sara Helmersson and Håkan Jönson, Sweden, who have stated “Empowerment focuses on social change, such as women finding their ways out of poverty, prostitution, violence and human trafficking” (Helmersson & Jönson 2013:3). Empowering the inner-self of individual to overcome oppressed situations can be found in the therapeutic sector and social work (ibid). Along with this perspective, since 2001, the term empowerment has been included in the international definition of Social Worker (ibid).

Applying to my study field in a social work context, “‘empowerment’ has been described as central for organizations working to support abused women” (Asgeirsdottir, 2011; Bennrup, Markgren, & Rädenmark, 2008; Bruno, Havez-Sanchez, Lundkvist, & Åslund, 2010; Olsson & Larsson, 2007; Socialstyrelsen, 2003, 2010 in Helmersson & Jönson 2013:2). In a Swedish context, “empowerment has been associated to the concept: ‘support to self-support’ (hjälp till självhjälp) or HTSH that incorporates certain similarities to empowerment” (Helmersson &
In accordance, researcher Lisette Caubergs and agricultural engineer and Social Sciences professor Sophie Charlier, both Belgians, have argued that the feminist intake has added that empowerment includes the notion of ‘power’ (2007: 9) which means, in terms of my case study, giving the power to the survivors. At Stígamót, the strengthening of self-esteem, self and group confidence; is operating through individual counselling and the Swan/collective group session. It therefore follows the definition of social work and implements the self-help Swedish concept as well.

In a broader sense, I argue that empowerment is made for both women and men in order to concretize a gender-equal society. Appealing for women’s empowerment is thus legitimized to balance the trend and therefore achieve equality of ‘power’. In the case of my study, women the survivors, bring about changes; this notion refers to the individual and to their ‘power’ / capacity they should invest in their personal life, it is also about the development of their identity in a group, in the community, society and politics. The empowerment is a dynamic that is acquired by intra-acting and offers the person to develop self-esteem and its own agency.

Example of research about survivors of prostitution’s empowerment

Here is an example of an organization that offers support pointing to women’s empowerment. This example is based on an article written by a senior gender-based violence coordinator for the International Rescue Committee Sudan program, Carmen Lowry. She was researching the support provided by the International Rescue Committee, to empower survivors of sexual assault in Darfur. It consists of a shelter where women can share their experiences and live there for recovery time. Women obviously gain confidence and self-esteem and can therefore develop their power with and within. No other trails are stated regarding the link between the empowerment of the survivor and, the enhancement of diminution of violence neither for gender equal society (Lowry 2007).

In the context of prostitution, in most researches, the use of empowerment emphasizes on harm reduction or sanitary risk reduction, US researcher Manoj Pardasani bases his study on the evaluation of a development agency’s project in India. Its focus is on sex-worker’s empowerment for sanitary risk reduction. Prostitute women are going to be empowered through education in order to limit the risk of contracting and propagate HIV. This form of reasoning has a regulationist political position, since it encourages women to stay in the sex-trade, however the approach will empower them to enable them to go to health care centres and use condoms:

Pardasani is claiming that: “If women do not have the ability to initiate safe sex or access
primary healthcare and health-related information because of the stigma attached to their ‘lifestyle’, they will be at an increased risk of contracting HIV” (2005:118).

Therefore, the article is not oriented towards the empowerment of women in prostitution; rather, it is about giving the responsibility to prevent or to cause HIV to all people in prostitution. Indeed, it is said that “According to health officials, the epidemic is fuelled by married and unmarried men visiting sex workers in urban areas (UNDP6, 2001)”. Hence, this research is not focusing on the welfare of individuals in prostitution such as those for whom Stígamót work. The research has not show that the program has helped women to get out of the trade, their method is limited to individual empowerment.

Another study has been done by an American activist, the founder of PEERS association, Jannit Rabinovitch, and concerns prostitute empowerment based on a harm reduction approach to prostitution which mainly consists of “decreasing the negative consequences of a given activity”. The ethnographic research has been achieved at PEERS (Prostitutes’ Empowerment, Education and Resource Society), in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. The main empowerment strategy of PEERS consists of offering a “three-month life skills training program for people still involved in prostitution and/or addicted to drugs or alcohol. Employment and training for people exiting the trade include a six month youth internship program, volunteer speakers bureau, administrative support volunteers, and employment at PEERS” (Rabinovitch & Lewis, 2001 in Rabinovitch, 2004:247). Here, the voice, the structure and the organization of the centre is in the hands of the survivors; the staff can give advice to each other, have a voice and might be more influential for those who are still selling themselves as the counsellors are survivors of the sex-trade themselves. The similarities with Stígamót are the empowerment and agency approach where survivors should be responsible for themselves and be able to develop their capacity to act and make choices.

Another study achieved by US based criminal justice scholar Sarah Ullman, and US psychologist Stephanie Townsend, is based on empirical data such as interviews and research regarding: “What constitutes an empowerment approach and a feminist empowerment approach to working with survivors following a sexual assault” (2008: 299). Their study has been achieved with interviews of 25 advocates who were working at rape crisis centres in a large Mid-western metropolitan area of Missouri, USA. The research acknowledges the “feminist empowerment approach” (ibid) towards survivors of sexual assault, focusing exclusively on ‘power within’

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6 United Nations Development Programme
therefore the empowerment of the inner-self. Their feminist empowerment approach is survivor-centered and similar to the Stígamót practices; “follow the survivor’s agenda is sort of your mantra” (Ullman & Townsend, 2008:304); “the survivor has to make it better for themselves” and no one can “make those decisions for them” (ibid.), the empowerment starts with the feeling that one can decide for oneself, so the counsellor trusts each person and is confident with the decision the person took to fulfil their needs. There is no use in “bombarding them with advice” (ibid.), the individual has to feel the need to change. The survivors should regain control over their lives, usually, when sexual abuse occurs, the person is under control. With this feminist empowerment approach, the role is inverted and the survivor is gaining control over their life, this is in connection to the development of power-to as well. According to the rape-crisis centre, an example given is that you can suggest to a woman to leave her abuser partner but cannot suggest the same to a child who is under eighteen. So the support is single person ‘adjusted’.

This research has been really close to the Stígamót philosophy; it shows how empowerment may be used in a feminist context and what elements are constitutive of this approach. To support the closeness with Stígamót, here is a social worker quotation: “women who come to Stígamót are ready and willing to work it out, talk about it and do something about it […] they are talking and reflecting upon their experience in prostitution […] we can’t force them to come because people who are forced won’t get anything out of it” (SW1.07:40).

Another highly relevant research is presented in an article written by sociologist scholars from Sweden Sara Helmersson and Håkan Jönson, related to a study based on a survey from Swedish organizations that support abused women, using empowerment as an approach/method for some people of the centres but can be used as a goal/result for others. Their study reveals that issues of power, empowerment and ‘help to self-help’ concept/method are use to “support”, “help” and “strengthen” the “victims”. Similar to Stígamót, the study says that the “ helpers should ‘support’, ‘be present’, ‘work in the background’, ‘push’, ‘guide and advice’ but not take over […] this results in power and self-confidence” (2013:6) so the services provided are ‘tailor made’ according to the survivors, they are positioned as responsible for themselves. “In the survey, empowerment was described as more therapeutic and more power sensitive then the existing ‘help to self-help’ (HTSH) approach”. Indeed, empowerment induces HTSH in itself (Helmersson & Jönson 2013:11). And further: “the finding that empowerment was most frequent among municipal crisis centres shows that the concept has become associated with professional social work in Sweden” (ibid.). It is therefore a sign of a recognized and professionalized method. Indeed, according to their study, “empowerment is used as a method” the professionals
working at the centres confirm that “a knowledgeable client is an empowered client” (ibid). This is perfectly in line with Stígamót philosophy.

What distinguishes the Swedish Association of Women Shelters movement with Stígamót is their divided ideology “concerning priorities between individual support and a gender political struggle”, so the research based on interviews recalls an emphasis on “individual aspect only, there was no mention of political action” (Helmersson & Jönson 2013:7). This is a radical difference with Stígamót which bases its political actions on the individual work. According to Stígamót, empowerment of individual should rely on the inner and external aspect; it is about investing “power-Within/With and -To” (Oxaal and Baden, 1997: 1; Charlier & Caubergs, 2007: 10). According to Swedish based philosopher, Per-Anders Tengland, structural and political change added to individual transformation can induce radical and sustainable change for the whole society, including women, men and children therefore provoke a gender-equal society (2008: 80).

This study is close to the philosophy of Stígamót; unfortunately the political dimension is missing. I will refer to this research to relate on the use and practices of empowerment and Self-support.

**Situating the thesis**

*Previous research on the pro & con debate:*

Since the situation of my master thesis has an abolitionist position towards prostitution and to some extent, is embedded in the pro-cons debate, I shall briefly discuss the issue regarding the pro-prostitution point of view which struggles for the regulation of prostitution in opposition to the cons-prostitution side which argues for the abolition of prostitution. The major authors among others, who have discussed the issues, are on the cons-prostitution side: American feminist, author and outspoken critic of sexual politics, Andrea Dworkin; American lawyer and activist on sex equality, Catharine MacKinnon and, American radical lesbian feminist activist, Janice Raymond. On the pro-prostitution part, there are an American writer of non-fiction essays about sexuality and erotic fiction Pat Califia and, American psychotherapist, researcher and teacher at Sociological and Political Centre, Gail Pheterson, in Paris; all of these authors, have been discussing the pro and cons of prostitution and its consequences or benefits either on a personal or on societal level.
However, I want to take another direction with this research and move to intersectional theory. Respectively, I am not going to do a ‘remake’ of the pro & cons discourses, which have already been done in many ways. Rather, I will exemplify briefly the two approaches, elaborate on the reflections of US anthropologist Gayle Rubin to state the debate and situate the abolitionism. The main arguments on the pros-prostitution-side, given by UK based researchers Judith Kilvington, Sophie Day and Helen Ward, are that the legalization of prostitution will be a mean to decrease the spread of diseases since it will encourage cleaner working conditions. Moreover, the person involved in prostitution will have access to social security (2001: 89). They also claim that legalization will diminish the stereotyping of people in prostitution therefore lower down the exclusion. Furthermore, the argument raised by Swedish lawyer and feminist activist, Gunila Ekberg is that the criminalisation will increase underground trafficking (Ekberg in Rain and Thunder Collective 2008: 5). In response to these affirmations, the cons-prostitution side claim that the spread of diseases will decrease drastically when less people are involved the sex-trade; many testimonies from survivors, police, social workers show that the legalisation have not been effective regarding the reduction of diseases (Ekberg 2004: 26). Regarding the stereotyping, the decriminalising legalisation has not changed it; feminist researcher Ine Vanwesenbeeck claims that sex-workers still face violence and exclusion in relation to their profession (Kilvington and al. 2001: 280). Even if the ‘underground traffic’ was supposed to be stopped with the legalisation, authors Judith Kilvington, and al., argue that in both legislations, the regulationist in the Netherlands and the abolitionism in Sweden, have driven some sex work underground for different reasons (2001: 78). At the Brussels’ Day of Action conference in 2013, Chief Superintendent of the criminal investigation department of Augsburg, Helmut Sporer, confirmed that the hidden market is even higher in legalised states such as in Germany, indeed, to make the maximum profit, pimp and brothel tenants do no declare all the women working there hence force them to work ‘illegally’ (recording of lecture, Brussels’Day of Action 1/10/13).

Pros and cons discourses in relation to prostitution are constructed in binary position such as gender (Rubin & Butler 1994:69). This is based on social aspects which are structured under language which itself create symbolic positions impacting on politics and people’s lives. However, Gayle Rubin argues in her context, for a “model which is not binary because sexual variation is a system of many differences” (Rubin & Butler 1994:70). Taking into account the statement of Rubin arguing for sexual variations would include that prostitution is a form of sexuality (ibid.); I argue however, that whatever sexual variation is taking place, when non-consent and violence occurs, it does not belong to sexual variation rather to sexual violence. To
that end, I am going to present in the following paragraph, the position the abolitionists have towards sexual violence among prostitution.

**Stating an abolitionist standpoint**

The pro-con debate is a polarization of the ‘modern’ versus ‘classical’ feminist; before the Swedish law in 19997 two strands existed, one was for sexual liberation and pleasure, the other was for an ‘under norms’ sexuality. In my opinion, the actual abolitionist debate is not a middle ground but stands outside of the binary discourses, the abolitionist standpoint is the converse since it does not penalise nor legalise the activities of people in prostitution, it does not criminalise the prostitute but the consumer of the trade. It is not about sanitary issues or the stereotyping of the person involved, it is about transgressing the binary discourses and changing the formal juridical power system based on an unequal power relation between the sexes therefore enhances a gender-equal social system. Abolitionism is different and might be closer to what Rubin states about the sexual industry which “reflects the sexism that exists in the society as a whole. We need to analyse and oppose the manifestations of gender inequality specific to the sex industry” (Rubin 1984:302). To that end, if the sex trade reflects the sexism of a society, it is obvious that women constitute the majority of that industry and the widespread behaviour associated with its violence, hence the society would be misogynist. According to the abolitionism movement which criminalises the demand for the trade (Ekberg in Rain and Thunder Collective 2008: 3-4); Taking into account the marketing rules since “prostitution is about business” (interview with social worker - SWI-T.5.19), with those rules, if the demand decreases, supply will follow. In accordance with this I argue that if buying ceases the trade will finish as well, however, diminishing the demand, discourses should be changed as well in order to modify the base of these cultures and societies which promote the prostitution trade. To that end, in the Oslo report, sociologist Ulla Edith Bjorndahl reveals that “If you look at the relationship between supply and demand you will see a trend towards a shift in the market where supply is greater than the demand. This means that it is a customers/buyers market. This in turn leads to changes in the power relationship between those that sell and those that buy sex” (2012: 32).

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7 (SFS 1998:408; revoked and replaced in 2005 by Chapter 6, Section 11 of the Swedish Penal Code),
The different legislation models

Before the introduction of the Swedish model in 1999, only two legislations could be enacted: the legalisation or the criminalisation of prostitution. Nowadays, the Swedish model has been added as a third political party to organize prostitution.

Legalisation consists of making prostitution itself legal. Usually, legalisation is followed by regulatory laws which consist of normalizing and regulating prostitution and its associated activities such as soliciting in a public place, operating brothels, and other forms of pimping. For example, in my native country, Belgium, prostitution is legalised, but the regulation criminalises pimping, and operating brothels is under tax control. In a country such as Germany, prostitution is legalised and the regulation states that pimping is illegal if the trade is under formal contract. The German regulation offers the right to women in prostitution to have a formal title: ‘sex worker’, the possibility to sue their client for non-payment, have health insurance and pension schemes, it makes the trade and the consumption completely normal, with this law, prostitutes intend to eradicate of any kind of stereotype and exclusion.

Then comes the criminalisation, where prostitutes, pimps, clients, tenants of brothels are criminalised and charged. The impact on women in prostitution is that they are more stereotyped. In some countries women have no access to health care; they face the enforcement and violence of authorities such as police officers. Usually, the clients, pimps and tenants of brothels are not charged since they are not in a ‘front position’, the women are easier targets as responsible for the ‘crime’.

The content of my research has been influenced by the legislation in Iceland, similar to Sweden, that has prohibited the purchase of sexual services since 2009.

At a global level, the law which criminalises sex buyers was first applied in Sweden in 1999\(^8\). According to researchers Charlotta Holmström in health and society, Malmö, and May-Len Skilbrei at Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies in Norway, argue that from 1999, Sweden has classified the sex trade as male violence against women and girls, impacting on gender equality (2008: 30), stating that the clients were responsible for the perpetuation of this trade therefore should be penalised. The penalisation of clients includes pimps as well as the tenants of brothels. On the women’s side, they are not charged with anything, they have access to

\(^8\) Sources: Swedish government webpage: [http://www.government.se/sb/d/4096/a/119861](http://www.government.se/sb/d/4096/a/119861) (10/04/14)
health checks and insurance, women are less stereotyped since the shame goes to the client and not to the women involved in prostitution. I am going to discuss this point further.

**Theoretical concepts and perspectives**

Using grass-roots feminists’ empiricism as a starting point and based on a socialist feminist perspective, I will position women survivors at the centre of my research issue. Developing an understanding of how women in a situation of male perpetrator subordination and violence, in a context of prostitution in Iceland, have survived terrible situations and, in contact with Stígamót have developed their inner-power, gain self-confidence follow a survival position which brings them the possibility to act and create change at both an individual and institutional level. In addition, there still seems to be the notion that before starting to work on the self as far as it is possible at Stígamót, women were victims of men perpetrating sexual violence, sexual harassments, involuntary sexual actions and more, without little possibilities to change the exposed situation, but at Stígamót in an empowerment dynamic, the women are not allowed to be a victim anymore on the one hand because the social workers would become the new influential perpetrators as their idea of victim is a passive one (Tengland 2008: 81), which would logically make them victims of feminism eventually. On the other hand, women become survivors while they can acknowledged their past victim position and realise they have been confronted with extremely difficult and horrible situations from which they need to escape and actually survive. It seems that ‘surviving’ is a rite of passage from victim to feminist; from disempowerment to empowerment, from passive to active.

My initial understanding is that the power difference, intersecting with gender equality, creates an imbalance and generates discursive politics; the use of empowerment will counteract the power differential embedded in the discursive politics. This new assemblage leads to agency of people who are therefore able to act towards enhancement of gender equality; make their own choices, free of any juridical system of power (Foucault in Butler 1990: 25).

In the following points, I first state how gender equality operates in a mainstream context and the specificities while it concerns a feminist approach. Then I will approach the power differences in a bio-power regime to follow with the intersecting categories of sexuality practices. Afterwards, I will introduce what is intersectionality and how I understand it and how it applies to my case study. Since gender-equality is embedded in politics, I follow this with an explanation on the
politics of sexuality, its elaboration and consequences. Finally, I refer to empowerment and the use of power to counteract the victim’s role, and at structural level, the gender-inequalities.

**Feminist equality and gender equal society**

To begin this section, I would like to discuss my position regarding the gender-equal society in comparison to the socialist feminist aims. Indeed, my critique goes towards the gendered discourses that have been embedded into mainstream discourses and are based on neo-liberal objectives, such as those stated by sociologist researcher Signe Arnfred in Denmark: “with a focus on ‘women’ out of context and often household level, and technical aspects” (2001:77) are the major aspects of their actions. Also, women became gender and the gender-equal-society, became gender-mainstreaming. To me, Gender mainstreaming resonates such as a metaphor of using ‘salt & pepper’ that can be spread here and there without generating transcending change in the receipt. Indeed according to Kabeer gender mainstream discourses have developed strategies which focus on power relations without including global vision meaning that gender mainstreaming is operating at the periphery, it does not include critical discourses analysis and its deconstruction. Such use of empowerment is made by the World Bank, the major UN agencies and the OECD-DAC group (2001: 17).

While I am aiming at a gender equal society, my research and goals are different from the gender mainstream practices. Indeed, despite aiming at both female and male equality in society to reach economical goals, I am focusing essentially on women as a starting point since they are in ‘human-rights-imbalance’ in comparison to men. Accordingly, rather to disempowered men, the choice goes to empower women, reinforce their self-esteem and grow their agency in order to push them to reach an equal level of power. This viewpoint seems radical to me because buying sexual services have been considered to be a crime, as victims the women are not confined to a passive role anymore, there they are empowered and have the possibilities to become survivors. Their position as survivors, gives them the tool of experience to struggle for the end of sexual violence in allegiance with other survival women and organisations, their voices can be heard and their discourses can be used to deconstruct the mainstreamed one hence changing the political arrangement regarding gender-equality.

**Power differences and bio-power technologies**

My research will not analyse centrally the relationship of power between different parties such as women and men, state and citizen, etc. Instead, I will use the notion of power in an empowerment context, where grass-roots movements are articulating strategies in order to challenge some particular aspects of the society’s organization such as prostitution which causes
an increase of inequalities between women and men, therefore creates imbalances of power and creates situations where women are subordinated and without power. To challenge women’s position, I will make use of the same means as used in counselling sessions at Stígamót: transgression of the norms through language. Based on Foucauldian perspectives, working on the meaning and function of the language as regulatory practice, it is useful to understand one’s own position in a social-cultural system based on discursive practices, thereby deconstructing the conditioning people are embedded in.

Foucauldian philosopher Hubert Lederer Dreyfus and anthropologist Paul Rabinow, affirm that power has different forms, “Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the same that one attributes to a complex strategical relationship in a particular society” (1983: 187) it is therefore something diffuse, that touches each of us, in every situation encountered, in different ways. For Foucault, power is the operation of political technologies throughout the social body (ibid.). The political technologies can be the society, political system, cultures, norms of a society, religion, rules stated in a family circle, and various institutions, both formal and social. Altogether in interconnection, the political technologies give formation of power relations that rules people’s lives and are expressed by the social body, which is the person, and this is what Foucault calls bio-power. For instance, the police exercise a power of control and penalisation on buyers of sex in Iceland, each ‘buyer-of-sex body’ will know and respect that power therefore is supposed to stop their practice of subordination and violence towards women. A modification of bio-power induces a change in discourses, in power relations and political structures therefore, has the potential to enhance a gender-equal society.

Relying on Foucault, the care of the self, including physical, mind and soul required constant work, which should be prioritised over other activities such as social and political matters. In accordance, this attitude of introspection would help the subject to free themselves from the ‘bio-power-system’. Nevertheless, he argues that this attitude relies on particular social groups and culture, and concerns people who yearn to live another life, different from the majority of individuals, who follow the laws and norms without questioning their impact on the self and others (Foucault 1984: 74). This ‘culture of the self’ began in the Roman and Hellenistic time, where people were looking more for a personal code of conduct rather than those given by a public authority (Foucault 1984: 53). He mentions that this practice ‘culture of the self’ is both personal and social (Foucault 1984: 81). This practice of self-observation, induces the

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9 In French language, ‘culture of the self’ refers to the care of the self as a philosophy of life.
development of another vision of the self, of others and society (Foucault 1984: 89). It is also about reflecting on the social, culture, politics, creating links with others as well and building a form of resistance and transgression towards the bio-power regime. This attitude for ‘the care of the self’, leads me to consider the process of empowerment, and the four forms of power acquisition which will be detailed in a further chapter.

Regarding power, in agreement with Foucault, power is unstable and multi-directional; it can operate from both bottom-up and top-down. However, Foucault states that “power comes from below and we are all enmeshed in it (…) both groups used these advantages to their own ends (…) For Foucault, unless these unequal relations of power are traced down to their actual material functioning, they escape our analysis and continue to operate with unquestioned autonomy, maintaining the illusion that power is only applied by those at the top to those at the bottom” (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983: 186). In that perspective, authors Zoë Oxaal and Sally Baden, argue that “Women’s empowerment should lead to the liberation of men from false value systems and ideologies of oppression. It should lead to a situation where each one can become a whole being regardless of gender, and use their fullest potential to construct a more humane society for all”( Oxaal and Baden 1997: 2). Here, it can be said that the bio-power-system is itself entrenched in their restrictive rules, when one dominates another it impacts on its own freedom as well - the freedom to act according individual’s values and not as a performer of created value/norms. I argue that the use of empowerment to repossess the power offers a possibility to deconstruct and understand the bio-power functioning, such as domination-power’s use, the empowerment’s use also produces intra-action in which the empowerment of one influences the empowerment of another. I observed this reciprocity of empowerment in the work of Stígamót, indeed, the empowerment of survivors of sexual violence among prostitution and trafficking empower the social worker as well, it is a process of reciprocity and intra/inter-action (Lykke 2010: 51). This reciprocity goes further when through political will and action, the empowerment of the survivors influence, via the empowerment itself of Stígamót, the liberation of women and men from false values about sexuality, human beings, violence, gender, and so on. Following Foucault, “power is exercised upon the dominant as well as on the dominated; there is a process of self-domination or auto colonization involved” (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983: 186), in the sense that the dominant part is exercising domination on itself, the process that looks like a bottom-up process since the initiator, at the bottom, is touched by the consequences of its power, felt/lived at the top.

A deconstruction of the bio-power regime inducing a gender-equal political reform will impact on the way people indentify with the categories of sex, gender therefore on the performing of...
sexuality. In the following point, based on Foucault, I will discuss on a theoretical perspective what, Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler have generated regarding the politics of sexuality.

**Politics of sexuality, a theoretical perspective**

Based on “Thinking Sex” written by Gayle Rubin 1984 in an American – British context, the politics of sexuality have changed. Nevertheless, the reflections on the politics still prevail.

In “Thinking Sex”, Rubin discussed the legislation changes that occurred in the US and UK during the 19th century regarding sexuality, its classifications of binary oppositions, such as sane/insane, moral/immoral, its repression and criminalisation. Those laws and regulations were mainly targeting the ‘deviants’ from the heterosexual and religious norms. To prevent immoral sexual behaviour, ‘deviant persons’ (1984:270), and further “they share common features of social organization; like homosexuals, prostitutes are a criminal sexual population stigmatized on the basis of sexual activity” (Rubin 1984:286).

The system she denounces is the non-adequate law that criminalises different kinds of sexual practices including same sex practices, commercial sex such as prostitution, pornography, sex shop, and so on. In History of Sexuality, 1: the will to knowledge, Foucault argues that “New sexualities are constantly produced, and that sexuality is a social construct (Foucault 1978 (1): 140); accordingly, through discourses, the telling-stories, testimonies and confession induced interpretation of sexual practices. These interpretations have produced sexual ‘framework’, leading itself to the creation of norms (Foucault 1978 (1):36-40). Hence, prostitution which is a form of sexuality made of social constructions based on power relations and discursive meanings; natural or not, oldest profession or not, prostitution has been regulated, influenced, discussed, studied and constructed by those who take advantage of it, according to their different aims (Foucault 1978 (1): 48). In this respect, those who pretend that a sexual affair is a necessity, I would claim that this sexual necessity has been discursively created as well!

In “Thinking Sex”, Rubin, struggles for erotic variety, I agree with her speech which was made in the nineteen century, however, the situatedness of my research is different compared to hers, the discourses and established norms on sexuality have changed as well. If repression and criminalisation of sexual deviants were predominant in the US and UK in the 19th century, the tendency is inverted in Europe nowadays and many countries have legalised the sex trade (procons.org10 03/08/14), according to my interview at Stígamót, many women are dispossessed

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of their body and are violently exploited by male buyers essentially, “in Sweden, prostitution is officially acknowledged as a form of male sexual violence against women and children” (Ekberg, 2004: 2), therefore it has been criminalised. Arguing for a radical theory of sex which “must identify, describe, explain and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression” (Rubin, 1984: 277) therefore “reformulate the concept of sexual injustice within a more constructivist framework” (ibid.), the theory of sexuality should renounce to the sex essentialism which gives the “idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institution. Sexual essentialism is embedded in the folk wisdoms of western societies, which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial, and trans-historical” (Rubin 1984: 275). The sex essentialism argues that “sex is a property of individuals” (ibid.). Connecting Rubin’s statements to the pro-prostitution side, which argues for the legalisation and regulation of prostitution such as the German model, it would be that on the one hand, sex is the property of the perpetrators who can purchase sex as often as wanted; on the other hand this model implies sex prior to social life, therefore it is about positioning sex and sexuality at the top of social priority, prior to the end of violence and health issues, among others. Since sex essentialism is unchanging, asocial, and trans-historical, I am claiming for its contrary, a radical theory of sex and sexualities including the abolitionism of prostitution and the end of violent sexuality practices.

In my opinion, a notable development of ‘erotic stigma’, claiming for buying sexual intercourse as a fundamental human right seems widespread and sexuality has become rationalized and institutionalized (Foucault 1978: 33). Similarly in Gender Trouble, Butler argues that “the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimizing and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation” (Butler 1990: 2). From those exclusionary practices the juridical structures which institutionalised people rights and identity established its rules and norms to which people identify. It is to say that power relations co-construct sexuality and gender: “sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in term of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions” (Butler 1990: 30).

To dismiss the oppressive categories in which people are entangled, empowerment might be a useful tool to avoid the domination, vulnerable and victimized positions established by discourses and power differential. In accordance, the following point reflects on empowerment as a process of change.
**Intersectionality theory**

In relation to my interview study, it is about reflecting on giving the power to the survivors and helping them to discover how power is performed and influences their lives with an implication at structural level besides, intersectionality, highlights the multiple elements which occur in the domination or empowerment of people in society. To do so, based on gender studies professor Nina Lykke, I make use of intersectionality as a linking tool between personal and structural levels of empowerment, to understand how prostitution and the survivor’s empowerment inscribe in a gender-equal society. In “feminist theorizing of intersectionality” (2010: 71-73) there are those who are based “on anti-discrimination and social approaches” (ibid.) such as US-based feminist law Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw whose model of intertwined effects of gender/race was represented by the use of roads crossing each other as a metaphor. Her theory was based on structural intersectionality which induces the understanding of power differential in the entanglement of intersections such as gender, race and ethnicity (Crenshaw in Lykke 2010: 71-73).

In order to understand the empowerment and agency of survivors, I looked at both the intersections they were embedded in and influence each another and to the discourses associated to thisembedment. Accordingly, discussing the intersections between gender and sexuality and questioning how sexuality is performed by gender, intersecting with violence in the context of prostitution seems highly relevant to answer my research question *how the empowerment of survivors of prostitution impact positively on a gender equal society?* Intersection methodology is also about questioning the interrelating systems that sustain violent structures which give existence to violent relationships such as prostitutes and the clients/perpetrators\(^{11}\) that impact on the global society.

I emphasize the relevance of my choice for using intersectionality and empowerment; both are entangled in the power differential, mechanism of its acquisition or dispossession and to construction of nomativities. Empowerment and intersectionality theory can therefore both be used as methodological tools which can study a process of change. Relying on Lykke who argues “In intersectionalities it is these processes of mutual constructions and transformations which are important […] intersectionality as a process rather than structure is informed by post-structuralist feminist theory where different power differentials and categorizations are based on different logics (Lykke 2010:51).

\(^{11}\) According to Stígamót, calling a buyer a client is a form of acknowledgement of the business. In an abolitionist perspective, the buyer is a perpetrator since it perpetuates the sex-trade-slavery.
To me, the process of intersectionality is similar to the process of empowerment as it strives towards a deconstruction of normative identity markers and deconstruction of power differentials. The deconstruction of the normativities is a transgression which enables the increase of awareness, at least the capacity to see in between, without remaining blurred by the system of norms and power differential. Therefore, the acquired awareness induces the acquisition of power-with, power-within-, power-to, and power-over, embedded themselves in the umbrella-term Empowerment (Charlier and Caubergs 2007: 9). Following the process of becoming through empowerment and intersectionality perspective, it leads the survivors to their agency and the ability to act independently and make choices. It also gives a processual understanding of the women’s entanglement in prostitution and their acquisition of powers in their process of becoming.

**Empowerment as a process of change**

My research question, ‘How an abolitionist organization is working from survivors’ empowerment to the enhancement of a gender-equal society?’ leads me to the exploration of feminist empowerment as a way of transforming women from subordination to agency. The entanglement of both academic and activist sources provide me with sufficient material to make inter-connection between the two fields’ sources together with my empirical-grass-roots-material and the context of my research in academia. However, to understand the empowerment approach and its major issues, I refer to Foucauldian philosopher, Per-Anders Tengland, sociologist scholars Sara Helmersson and Håkan Jönson among others, for the understanding and usages of empowerment. As first line-based, I relate primarily to Naila Kabeer’s analysis of the feminist empowerment.

Beyond the individual aspect of empowerment including the self-esteem and the acquisition of power over one’s life, “Empowerment has been associated with collective action as well as individual therapeutic work” (Helmersson & Jönson 2013: 2). I connect this explanation to the conceptual analysis made by Per-Anders Tengland, who argues that “The empowerment is seen as a goal and in some as a means (process, method, approach)” as far as I understood it, the goal is associated to a singular objective that can vary according to the needs, “e.g., consciousness raising and skills development, self-esteem, self-confidence, ability, autonomy and freedom”

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12 in order to find answers to my question and taking into account the double inscription of my research in both academic and activist field, I will therefore refer to both academic researches and those achieved for feminist development agencies including Swedish International Development cooperation Agency (SIDA) or the Commission on Women and Development (CWD).
(Tengland 2008:82). Those are understood as “final desires which are sought as goals rather than as means” (ibid.). The processual approach is about which means and how means are used in order for the person to be empowered, gain self-efficacy, control over one’s life, to act and take decision for a better life; therefore, the empowerment as a method and process is an approach that is often achieved with others, in a dynamic of intra-action hence mutual transformation (Tengland 2008: 87-91). The definition proposed by Tengland illustrates the process and the inter-action between the social worker and survivors:

“We achieve empowerment (in a combined sense) when a person (or group) A acts towards (in relation to) another person (or group) B in order to support B (by creating the opportunity and environment, and giving ‘expertise’ support) in gaining better control over (some of) the determinants (those relevant for the situation or profession) of her (quality of) life through (necessarily) an increase in B’s knowledge (self-knowledge, consciousness raising, skills development, or competence), or health (e.g., autonomy, self-confidence, self-efficacy, or self-esteem) or freedom (positive and negative), and this acting of A towards B involves minimizing A’s own ‘power’ (or influence) over B with regard to goal/problem formulation, decision-making and acting, and B seizes (at least) some control over this situation or process (goal/problem formulation, decision-making and acting)” (Tengland 2008: 93).

This explanation states how empowerment should be used in order to really support the individual in their own and personal process of becoming a survivor; by following its own aims and achieve control over one’s lives. This process has been observed at Stígamót and will be detailed further in the analysis chapter.

**Empowerment and agency**

Power’s acquisition lead to agency which is among other, about being able to make informed choices: “agency also encompasses collective, as well as individual, reflection and action […] Resources and agency together constitute the ‘capabilities’, the potential that people have for living the life they want” (Kabeer 2001: 21). However, some choices are embedded in social norms and its associated practices, where women’s choices are reinforcing their own subordination. Also, “to achieve embodied meaningful choices, it is not only about having material possibilities to achieve it, it is also about conceiving them within the realm of possibilities” (Kabeer 2001: 25-26); here the empowerment process and the deconstructionism intervene, and its use for questioning the norms and inequalities and developing the power-over (quality of life) which makes available other possibilities and choices than those available at a particular time.

While approaching agency, the notion of choice should be considered carefully, as stated and illustrated by Kabeer, choices can be limited and can limit the action of people, indeed, some choices are creating inequalities and are influenced by power relations: “power relations are
expressed not only through the exercise of agency and choice but also through the kind of choice people make [...] power and dominance can operate through consent and complicity as well as through coercion and conflict” (Kabeer 2001:24). Based on the survivors I met at Stígamót, I argue that some women can choose to work through their consequences of prostitution, then the means they will chose to achieve their aim can be various. Similarly, those who want to solve their economical problem will make different kinds of choices, which are influenced by the way people “perceive their needs and interest” (Kabeer 2001:25), this perception is “shaped by their individual histories and everyday realities, by the material and social context of their experiences and by the vantage point for flexibility which this provides” (ibid.). Accordingly, observing that survivors I interviewed had been sexually abused in childhood, that experience might have influenced the perception of their needs and their ‘choice’ for prostitution to achieve their aim e.g., economical problem, hypersexualisation, drug issues, greediness, etc. However, all of them have faced the consequences of their subordination and kind of choices available at that time. This kind of situation will be discussed in depth in the analysis part.

Empowerment is a multidirectional process rather than the common processes using in liberal societies which consist of a top-down process, as suggested by Manoj Pardasani:

“Empowerment is a process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situation (Gutiérrez, 1990). Empowerment occurs at the micro level (development of self-esteem and increased control over one’s life) and at the macro level (development of social collective action and increased political power). Individual empowerment can lead to increased group consciousness, and group empowerment can, in turn, enhance the functioning of its individual members” (Gutiérrez, 1995; Stevens, 1998 in Pardasani 2005: 117)

In this way, empowerment is not something that can be imposed or decided by someone else. It is a matter of handling power and responsibilities by themselves in order to be able to define and decide what the interest and needs are (i.e., power-over one’s life).

Empowerment, is therefore a process which will help the individual to gain power in order to make considered choices which will “have the potential to challenge and destabilize social inequalities” (Kabeer 2001: 26). However, “choices which express the fundamental inequalities of a society, which infringe the right of others or which systematically devalue the self, are not compatible with the notion of empowerment” (ibid.). Using empowerment to counteract victim position into survivor, women intersecting with different forms of power, various situations, people etc, are step by step building strong self-confidence to make choices, act and enhance, collectively or not, a gender-equal society.
Analysis

I present my analysis as question-answers that correspond to my research question: *How an abolitionist organization is working from survivors’ empowerment to the enhancement of a gender-equal society?* I therefore build on dialogues between social workers and/or survivors regarding the specific theme associated to each question. The selected quotes\(^\text{13}\) from the interviews provide me the ground based material leading to analytical reasoning on the basis of my theoretical and methodological approaches mentioned in the previous chapter.

1. *Narrative of experience related to prostitution and how both staff members and survivors work in the organization.*

Knowing that each person, both staff members and survivors have read the aim of the interview and my interest about their experience in prostitution, I expected talking about very private matters and still highly stereotyped and exclusionary practices such as prostitution, trusting someone such as myself, could be hard. It required a certain strength to be able to talk about personal experience in prostitution. This strength exists because the majority of the survivors’ participants have already worked with themselves and their experience, the prostitution and society, and can therefore share their points of view about their path into prostitution.

**How survivors talk about their own experiences with prostitution**

Since my interviewees have already reflected upon their life path, I chose to beneficiate from their empowerment and state a picture of their perception of prostitution entangled at a personal and social level.

According to most of them, to understand what sexuality is, to avoid violence, misogyny and gender inequalities, they think that opening the dialogue among people for example, via the media, besides adjusting education and including prostitution in sexuality courses might be a solution, at least in helping boys and girls, women and men to reflect upon sexuality, prostitution and violence. Here are some of their reflections:

“Prostitution is actually more then what people think. Prostitution should be talked about with parents. Their children are maybe doing it. And parents don’t realize that their children are doing that or that someone else is selling their children to do prostitution” (S.4a.22);

\(^{13}\) I reference my interview quotations with codes which help me to find back the sources easily but do not allow the reader to identify the interviewee.
This quotation is highlighted by other survivors who argue:

“Boys and girls should get education about prostitution. And the same education for girls as the boys gets. Give them proper ways of thinking about sex and sexism. Communicate about prostitution, how bad is that for the boys and the girls. The damages it does when you buy another person and the consequence it does when you are selling yourself in prostitution. It is good to talk about that when you have sex education, about 11, 12 years old” (S.3a.35).

“Girls also, they think they won’t lose their virginity if they have anal sex, so if they want to conserve their virginity, just have anal sex or blow jobs! Virginity is very subjective and it is a patriarchal way of thinking. Sometimes it is just difficult to teach young people, they just have distorted views about sexuality because of all the porn they have viewed online, the access to porn is so easy” (S.1a.14).

Their voices highlight the fact that the representations most youths and many people have about sexuality is influenced a lot by the power exerted by the social constructions. And prostitution is violent sexual intercourse in which the power relation is highly present and unequal. One survivor adds:

“I think there are no positive things about prostitution. NO, and it can’t be because someone is giving you the money, and if you take the money, you are the lower, lower than the buyer, he owns you. And many say that: ‘just shut up, I paid you so just do what I told you’” (S.2a.38).

Another survivor states:

“It is so much worse because they feel their own you, they are paying you and you are doing things with the customers that you would normally just say no if you go with someone else. ‘No, I don’t want this’, but with a customer you are kind of trapped, you do want they want, in extended ways” (S.5a.55).

These testimonies show how strong the subordination is to others and how far away from the self the individual is, so far, with a very low self-esteem that they cannot set their boundaries.

Then another woman insists on the power inequalities in connection to culture:

“It is almost impossible to see how sick it is when all this culture, you know, all kinds from young boys, married, to old men. You know, there were men who had beautiful women and everything and they still do it, it is just so sick. And I think it is about power, they want the power. Many of them, they just, I have not got raped at my job but many others did. So for some of them, they give you the money and you are theirs. I have never been raped, because I was pleasing them, I definitely pleased them, I did everything. So I think power and culture are a big reason why it is so hard to get people think, you know, this isn’t normal, this isn’t right to buy other people’s bodies” (S.5a.62).

Here is explained how the ‘culture’ influence’s the way sexuality is performed, and hence has consequences on the subordinated, usually women and girls. As far as I understood it with ‘culture’ they mean all the social norms, codes of conducts, education, media, laws and so on, all those things that have been learned and which influence people’s way of thinking and behaving.
Regarding the ‘cultural’/social consequences on the subordinated person, some of the survivors argue:

“It is about social influence, most of the guys are obsessed about porn and anal sex. Because it is in the porn movies and their wife didn’t want to do it, I was like ‘oups I am not gonna do it neither, no way’! And fantasy (silence) like, some have horrible fantasies, I have never met with them but talk, some were asking if I would be ok to play the role of a rape victim” (S.1A.6).

In the testimonies about cultural practices, its link with pornography, some sign of misogyny seems to be evident:

“He didn’t have any respect for women, but I still did it because he paid well. He was not good looking, he was fat but just because he was rich and powerful I guess he could have everything he wanted, that makes me sick. He used to go a little bit over the boundaries. He can be dangerous, going always further over the boundaries until doing something terrible. Because he has the power, he treated me like an employee; he was giving orders, that one was twisted. It is only in the porn where you can see women enjoying getting their head and the gag reflex that is from porn. Guys think it is sexy when you gag. Sometimes it happens by mistake and then they are ‘yeah, oh right, that’s cool’. It is straight from porn, straight from porn, this gagging. Porn influences a lot guys’ ideas about sex (silence)” (S.1a.14).

What struck me along the testimonies previously quoted, is the relation of power the women have with their clients/perpetrators. But also the violence that goes along with the dominant position of the perpetrator, making the women victim of the perpetrator’s sexual desire and violence. Through the testimonies about the cultural aspects and its consequences, the principle example stated was the porn aspect which is a sexual practice that has been discursively created and has consequences on many women, girls and boys but also on the gender power arrangement in the society; indeed, the majority of buyers of sex who reproduce violent sexuality thought by the porn industry, are according to my interviewee, men. I argue, in line with Judith Butler, that some sexual practices like prostitution and pornography are performed in accordance to “construction within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions” (Butler 1990: 30). According to the survivors, pornography is associated to prostitution since prostitution is a place where pornographic fantasy can be expressed. Taking into account that both prostitution and pornographic became cultural/social construction based on discourses, the impact of the power operated in there is illustrated by Andrea Dworkin based on a survivor testimony: “pornography is the orchestrated destruction of women’s bodies and souls; rape, battery, incest, and prostitution animate it; dehumanisation and sadism characterise it; it is war on women, serial assaults on dignity, identity, and human worth; it is tyranny”(Dworkin 1989: introduction xxvii).

In regard to the societal/cultural influence and in agreement to survivor testimonies, it is via the counselling sessions for victim-survivors and in extended ways via the classroom, media and
seminar education, that empowerment can be used to understand and deconstruct the violent cultural/social aspects, such as pornography and prostitution are.

**How social workers talk about others’ experiences with prostitution**

At Stígamót, the ambition is not to judge what women did, or still do; indeed, they know that prostitution has many aspects and is a long way from a solution, some ‘victims’ are not always ready at the first meeting and that is acceptable.

According to the staff members, the previous situation where women have been conditioned, has a big impact on their resiliency and empowerment too, here is what the social workers think:

> “The culture makes a big difference. The Icelandic women know that we can talk about rapes. People are in interviewing in the media (silence) it helps to break the silence. The Icelandic are also traumatized but can overcome in a better ways’” (SWI.T.5.17).

> “Most of the foreign women have been brought by the police, social service, and immigration. We know they are trafficked and in prostitution but they will never recognize it. You will never get them to talk about it. With the other women here at Stígamót they will not accept to talk to anybody because they are affected, ashamed and feel guilty, this is what they are working through, facing the double life they have been living. Those are the women facing and working with it and who are ready. They are taking part in the swan group, are talking and reflecting upon their experience in prostitution. But with the other women, no this is impossible they are not in contact with the reality of prostitution” (SWI.G.1.1.1).

This quotation might be interpreted as if a top-down relation was established by Stígamót when they identify the foreign women as the ‘other’, it seems that they “reproduced a colonialist tradition of cultural essentialism” (Lykke 2010: 53) –white/educated/middle class women from a developed country’ in relation to women who are –black/poor class/uneducated, from a non-developed country (ibid.). To that extent I have to hypothesis which might justify this ‘top-down’ position interpretation, on the one hand, it might be about a language bias, so the mis-use of words might be due to the language break since English is their second language, they do not use it on a daily basis therefore bias might come from there. I had actually interpreted their position towards the foreign women differently from the one they have with the Icelandic. This is due initially to the language, it is easier to understand and express ideas in mother tongue, which is Icelandic, for both sides, survivors and counsellors. On the other hand, they make use of the words ‘culture’ and ‘other’ to name the difference and cultural/sociological/political context some women come from. I understand their emphasis as women in Iceland have learned different ‘norms’ according to their different political/cultural/societal situatedness. I validate my understanding hypothesis with my own position there, taken into account my geopolitical location, which is Belgium, I could notice the difference of what they call ‘culture’ especially regarding the sexual violence discourses, the topics were so much deeply and widely discussed.
than in my home country. For example, they have leaflets, both in Icelandic and English, about what to do when someone gets raped, where to go, the cost and process of juridical procedures, etc. This is so different the way one country/society/culture/political context approaches some subjects, among those very sensitive and intimate, such as rape and prostitution. I must confess that I have learned many new things about rape, for example. Thus, I think, without glorifying the women at Stígamót, “do not neglect the differences in interest generated by, for example, geopolitical positioning, class structures, ethnicised and racialised mechanisms of exclusion and oppression, and so on” (Lykke 2010: 53); they actually intended to highlight the difficulties they have to face with women who did not receive for example, the same education about the norms applied in Iceland. Indeed, even if Stígamót has existed for 24 years, it is with the shelter, Kristina House, which has been held for two years that Stígamót staff members have started working with non-Icelandic women who have been into prostitution and trafficking. I think they have not realized how much the situatedness of a person could actually influence all their behaviour, beliefs, etc. That was definitely a challenge for Stígamót and it seems that they have not totally succeeded. Due to their lack of financial and staff resources, they had to close down the shelter (Stígamót annual report 2013: 12-13). Therefore, from an intersectional view, it is to say that the multiple intersections, such as race, religion, nationality, age, ethnicity, etc. (Lykke 2010:80) which constitute a ‘social-person’ are different from one person to another. I think staff members are now aware of those intersection differentials, but at the time they started running Kristina House, they may not have had the resources to cope with everything. Additionally, while the staff argue that all the women are not ready to work out the consequences or talk about their life into prostitution, it appears to me to be a sign that they acknowledge that all women do not have identical interests (Lykke 2010: 54).

According to the huge difference between “cultures”, I interpret that the culture which comprises social/political/geographical/background elements that established the situatedness of a person, is indeed constitutive of the situated bio-power regime; where each and every one element intersect, influence and transform each another. To my understanding, each nation’s political and social system has its own bio-power regime which enables the perpetuation of the rules. Seeing the context, the Icelandic bio-power is different in term of backgrounds and consequences from the Belgian, the Nigerian, etc. therefore, influence and ‘shape’ its citizens differently therefore expose in other ways each person who encounters other bio-power regimes. I argue that in a context of empowerment survivors can realize which attachment they have to the bio-power regime, with the interaction of others, dialogue, different background and history, people are transforming each another and go further in their empowerment process. According to their
testimonies, Stígamót members are also in constant change and an empowerment process in order to meet the needs of people and society, by taking into consideration the intersections of class, race, ‘culture’, gender and sexuality, they can develop further understanding of what encourages women to start prostitution, but also to understand in relation to these intersections, where the breaks are that keep some women silent in regard to their experience with prostitution. One argues: “We always go further still it meets the ideology; and the ideology is that no one knows better than the person. People who come to Stígamót are their own expert” (SWI.T.5.17). No one knows better than the person how ze\textsuperscript{14} feels and hir needs; it is about changing the power balance, such as Tengland has argued, the individual hirself (or the group) formulates the problem, finds a solution to the problem and acts in order to solve it. This means for the professional that one leaves hir dominant role and instead only supports or facilitates the individual (or group) in formulating the problem and finding a solution to it. The professional becomes a collaborator in this process (Tengland 2008:91). In agreeing with this, a Stígamót counsellor argues: “My job is to support them and help them to find and do what they want to do. So we will never tell people what they have to do. We help them to figure out. I used to say all the answers you are looking for are inside you. So my job is to help you to find these answers” (SWI.T.5.17).

Accordingly, they cannot force anyone to get out of prostitution or to work on the self, therefore they will put their energy where and with whom it is possible to interact and go further so that everybody can achieve, their empowerment goal (Tengland 2008: 82).

In regard to the discourses element I gathered within both the traineeship and interview context, I believe that counsellors can recognize that all women do not respond the same way to counselling, and prostitution consequences therefore are not supporting “the ideas of linear social development” (Lykke 2010: 54); using the empowerment methodology which induces working with power and since power is multidirectional and intersects with diverse elements, it implies that empowerment works along intersectionality as well. In this perspective, their empowerment work with survivors is multi-directional and intra-acting hence the empowerment process transforms both the counsellors and survivors consideration of ‘others’, difference, individual

\textsuperscript{14}In English, ‘their’ for an individual can be used after having established the form (singular or plural). In order to transgress normativities, I chose to use gender neutral pronouns such as ‘ze/hir/hirself. Besides, the neutral pronoun avoids considering that people in prostitution are only women. It forces the reader to reflect further about norms and consider other possibilities. Source can be found at: http://web.mit.edu/trans/GenderNeutralPronouns.pdf (accessed 17 august 2014).
entanglement to bio-power regime and so on. As argued by Lykke, “according to post-colonial and anti-racist feminist, feminist theory, analysis and politics should instead recognize that global hegemonies, social subordination and exclusion produce power differentials among different group of women” (Lykke 2010: 54). By reflecting on their own intersectional position, as Icelandic, white, employed, expert, having a voice at national and international level and the impact their position may have on people, they will thus be in an honest empowerment process deconstructing the power difference. My initial postulate is that they do deconstruct power differential, accordingly.

The staff members also mentioned how women face their sex-trade’s life, in order to survive, the women in prostitution have to convince themselves that what they are doing is totally fine; one counsellor argues:

“I have been working in the swan group as well; all the women I met there told me the same. At the beginning, it was ok because they didn’t want to face the reality. They have to convince themselves that it is ok otherwise; they won’t be able to continue. Even for the client, if they complain, the client might leave or something, it is about money then. They have to wear a mask. At first, it always seems a good idea to start. Then it is getting worse and the consequences come later” (SWI.AT.2.10).

With this statement, it is observable that the women are entangled in bio-power elements; such as the subordination within some form of sexuality. Indeed, in Iceland, prostitution which is for some men a form of violent sexuality, it is not discussed well enough and displayed at ‘mainstream’ level, it remains a taboo and is associated with ‘something’ bad, and those who sell themselves should be ashamed. This pressure comes from social sexuality norms, as Rubin also points out (1984: 286), and money issues are so strong that women chose to keep silent and continue ‘working’ in the trade with the belief that this occupation will solve their financial problem and will finish soon as it has been mentioned in previous section with survivors point of view. Similar to a machine in which everything is interconnected, women are supposed to fit and act according the norms/discourses given, even if the self did not want to conform, the alternative offered to them were not satisfactory in one way or another, (depending on each individual and their history including education, schooling, family, events). Consequently, they had to find an alibi to ‘accept’ and survive their subordination / entrenchment to the bio-power-system. Noticeably, the social body and its history had the ‘requirements’ to be a receptacle to the power exerted by the political technologies, and hence became under the power of, in other words became disempowered. This conformism to the power exerted has been expressed by entering prostitution and conforming to certain norms.
Here is another example that reflects the inscription and non-deconstruction of the bio-power system, one counsellor says: “I don’t think that all the men who consume women into prostitution are evil, they just don’t know anything about the consequences. Society and the politicians should recognize the consequences of prostitution and it is important to talk publicly about it” (SWI.AT.2.11). This statement indicates that the absence of information leads people to act according to dogma and not in accordance with the reality of the self and life. The entanglement of the bio-power-system has different forms and it impacts according to each individual, hir experience, background, intersectional situatedness including geopolitical location, race, ethnicity, religion, age, gender and so on. Regarding the survivors, they have acted according to their intersectional discourses and experiences caused by violence, gender, sexuality, age and so on, all being part of that bio-power–regime they belong to. As stated earlier, their entrance in prostitution has been influenced by their previous experiences, which have come to respond to some pattern of the bio-power regime, by acting according to what the system makes available to them and hence constructs their beliefs and symbolic representations upon the system. In agreement, the men purchasing sex also ‘made’ of intersections of experiences, education, discourses and so on of the bio-power-regime, have come to consume prostitution without questioning it, considered by some as ‘normalized’ practice. Since it has been newly criminalised, it is still very entrenched in societies, ‘cultures’, behaviours, politics, and individual customs. Returning to Gayle Rubin (1984: 270) both LGBTIQ community and prostitutes were classified as ‘deviant’, nowadays, the LGBTIQ is better accepted, but prostitution is still not accepted, which means that the women involve in it, receive less support than other women and therefore the awareness campaign among civil society is also restricted. They are excluded, stereotyped and subjected to much more violence than other women are in daily life, which, as Norwegian sociologist Ulla Edith Bjørndahl states, renders “prostitute one of the most vulnerable and victimized groups in our society” Bjørndahl 2012:45). The main reasons for this high violence and exclusion are as argued by Bjørndahl in the Norwegian report “Dangerous Liaisons”

“Women in prostitution are in a very vulnerable situation because among other things their means of making money involves little interaction with the rest of society. Their “workplace” does not contribute to integration and the formation of networks in society, but rather separates and isolates you from it. At the same time the environment is characterized by the people in the community being in constant flux, something which makes it difficult to form a stable social network. The isolation and the lack of a social network are amplified by the fact that these women in so many ways are unwanted by society. They are unwanted because they are seducing temptresses, they are addicted to drugs, which places an economic burden on society, they are (illegal) immigrants from other cultures or they are people who bring criminality with them. They disturb us in public spaces and they lead a life that is incompatible with our values. The women themselves are aware that they are unwanted, which leads to feelings of shame and a perception
of stigma. This makes them isolate themselves further and pulls them even further from the rest of society. Additionally the environment attracts people who seem to wish to violate the women. The vast majority of men who seek out the women do so to have sex with them, not to inflict violence on them. However this report establishes that the violent offender is in most cases a customer and the violence they inflict on the women is frequently severe. This must mean that these women attract unstable and/or aggressive people, perhaps because they know that these women are vulnerable, will rarely seek aid and that the risk of being prosecuted is low” (Bjørndahl 2012:45).

This statement comes along to accentuate and strengthen the testimonies I had gathered in Iceland. In relation to how both survivors and staff members talk about prostitution, I noticed, that survivors mainly bring out the narration of causes which are often linked to familial, personal, financial issues, consequences which are similar to the staff perceptions, then comes their own empowerment process. The social worker interviews reinforce the survivors speech and similarly stress on the structural causes that lead women into prostitution, such as money issues, previous offence or sexual assault, unstable social life, poor level of education, etc. so many reasons that intersect and influence the women to enter the sex trade.

**How did women get into prostitution?**

According to the survivors’ opinions, and by order of frequency, they have been driven into prostitution because of the restriction in choices, economical issues, mental illness, family issues, the lack of education to find a job and drug addictions. Here is what they say: “I was working but I haven’t learned anything, I haven’t got any diploma so I got a lower salary. So I went to social services for money because I had two loans, and they said no, you have enough money and the loans don’t count” (S.2a.42). Another argues “The other women I met at the swan group, who are or have been in prostitution, felt before entering prostitution, felt dirty, damaged. They don’t, we don’t respect ourselves. We are already contaminated so we don’t care” (S.3a.30).

It appears that their choices were influenced by their previous experience encountered with a violence which has already broken them. Another survivor said:

“All of the women I met who have entered into prostitution had a relation to drugs or previous sexual abuse; all of them have some kind of history. That is the trigger for women to go there because we don’t have the respect for ourselves, our body” (S.5a.66); another affirmed: “I was sexually abused when I was a little girl by two men and hey (silence) then I was raped when I was 13 or 14, and hey (silence) […] If I hadn’t been broken before I would never have started in prostitution, I would never have seen this as an object to do or a possibility to do this” (S.3a.36).

It seems that their previous experiences shape the way they perceive their needs and interests (Kabeer 2001: 25). The experience of the survivors is reinforced by the counsellor’s statements,
the sixth of my counsellor participants accentuated that most of the people who went into prostitution had faced sexual abuse in childhood or as a teenager, and their statement relies on the entire person they met through the counselling sessions. One of the counsellors said:

“For many women, not all, they go into prostitution because they have been sexually abused before the prostitution. It is also a matter of power, they want the power back. Because when they were raped, they were totally under the control of their abuser. In prostitution, they have the power over men, because they can control what is going to happen, it is like ‘I will only do that, that and that’. But after, most of the women say that they didn’t have the power because they were bought” (SWI-AT.2).

Some of the survivors confirmed the Stígamót voice by arguing: “I felt I got the power, it is a lot of power you have… at a time…” (S.5a.65).

The survivors regularly mentioned the power relations that occur in prostitution. Often when they start selling themselves, they felt powerful then quickly the violent reality gets the upper hand over them. As regards the empowerment/disempowerment relations situated in a power differential regime, nobody wants to be dominated, rather individuals in accordance to the power differential ‘rules’, they prefer the option of getting the dominant role, and fighting to get the powerful position can be an endless ‘war’ of power. Here, the women got into the trap of ‘power war’ and thought that getting the power over someone would make them better. Actually, with experience and self reflection via the empowerment, they consider the power differential and how it is manifested into society, and hence understand that getting the power over one’s life rather than over another’s life is much more progressing in terms of well being and also raises self-confidence.

All survivors, the Stígamót staff members and their own statistics issued from the completed survivor form in counselling, have confirmed that prostitution is damaging to the body, soul and mind; the women, are caught in a social-discursive-norms system where their beliefs drive them into prostitution therefore increasing their pain, guilt and shame and thereby isolation. A social worker argues: “At Stígamót we try to make them accept the reason they have been pushed in that direction. Women often feel responsible for their choices but they couldn’t make a real choice, the range of choice was limited to prostitution. They did not think about education, university because they had a very low esteem” (SWI-AT.2).

Starting the interviews with the survivors’ participation, the first question I asked was “what is your background?” Usually, the survivors first talked about their childhood and focused on the unfortunate experiences encountered leading to the explanation of why they entered prostitution. For four out of five of my interviewees, I had to ask a second or third question to start talking.
about prostitution. All of my participants had been sexually abused as children or teenagers; four out of five told me that at the very beginning, one waited until the end of the interview to mention it. Four out of Five of my participants thought that prostitution was ‘OK’ at the beginning; however, quickly the practice became ‘awful’ for them. For one of them, prostitution was a bad experience leading to harmful consequences. “I was always unconscious about what I was doing and so I didn’t gain much from it at that time. […] but never in a million years had I had a clue of the consequences of this disgusting life. I never would do it if I had known” (S.5a.54). This testimony might be understood as an explanation stating how the survivors lived their embedment to the bio-power-system as stated in the previous section. Knowing that none of the participant went straight to the point is, to me, an indication that despite an already conscious reflection upon their life the social pressure is so strong that they still feel shame and guilt for their past decision, reflecting an incapability to make other choices and to distinguish themselves from the system. In regard to Kabeer (2001:24) and Foucault (1984:74) some choices and their associated practices are embedded in the bio-power-system, at that anchorage, women’s choices are reinforcing their own subordination to the system. The development of their self-esteem and power over one’s life through counselling brings them to work towards ‘the culture of the self’, consequently becoming aware of the pressure and the power that the system exerts on them.

To support my statement, I argue that even if the participants have already worked through their wounds, the shame is still present for most, since they all told me at some point that they have worked a lot on shaming and others’ gazes but still, in some situations, or with some people, they would not be able to mention their experience in prostitution because of the shame and guilt.

“I don’t want to disappoint them, I don’t want a (silence)I feel it was not a choice it was because I needed the money but still I am like why didn’t I just start selling drugs and make money on that, why I didn’t find other things” (S.5a.65);

Another said: “Yes, I still think I am hiding. Also, one think about that, in a way we have to hide more, we are not going to the media and say ‘I was in prostitution and take a picture of me’, because I think the country, the people here are not ready for that, because most people are just mental” (S.2a.40).

Returning to Foucault and how the individual embodied the social/political/cultural power system; the shame and guilt comes from the cultural practices and discourses which maintain the representations people have about prostitution and reinforce the power imbalance. Indeed, the law that criminalises the purchase of sex is a transgression of normalised discourses, it puts the responsibility on the consumer and perpetrators, therefore, the power relation where the
subordinated person subjected to the violence of the dominant, is not inverted, rather it tends to disappear: to be abolished. Applying the abolitionist and feminist ideology changes the perception of a society looking at people in prostitution and at the purchaser. It changes the power dynamic between people and offers a possibility to work towards a society freer of violence.

Regarding specifically how they started, three of the five survivors started to sell themselves through the internet: “I started selling sex on internet, it is really easy to start” (S.3a.27). Four of them had been ‘advised’ by a friend who was already in prostitution: “Have you ever gone out and gone home with a man for one night? I said yes. This is the same, but you can get paid for it now, it is a luxury. But it was hell. So that’s how I started, with a client from her” (S.2a.39).

One of my participants had been forced by a third person to enter prostitution. When exiting the sex-trade, she was on hard drugs and started prostitution again in order to get the drugs.

“The pain was so much that I only wanted to die, and I started to shoot myself and ended up (silence) just as a heroin junkie. And if you are a heroin junkie, then you do anything to get your drugs because if you don’t get heroin every day, you get very very sick. So (silence) I did basically everything, and anyone could do anything with me and I did not care, only if I got my drugs. And this time was just horrible, it was just (silence) I don’t know (silence) it was (silence) it was just so bad” (S.1.a.16).

Having already been broken with previous violence, accompanied with a very low esteem and tendency for self-neglect, any kind of advice would have been good for them to cope with financial concerns. It is an intersectional environment where multiple elements inter-act, (fixed and bounded entities that clash like billiard balls) and intra-act (mutual transformation of each other element) (Lykke 2010: glossary) with factors such as incest, isolation, depression, economical problems, different advice from people… all together influencing the direction of the person. Adding to that, the cultural embedment of the individual who, in a discursive societal system, feels guilty about hir rape, hir family, hir financial situation, etc. a power exerts over someone and disempowers that one. The patriarchal discursive system does not include the co-responsibility of both social and individuals in a system that sustains violence against women.

On the other hand however, the social workers shared their observations regarding the reasons women get in prostitution. According to them, “most of the women see prostitution as a solution because of their background. Sometimes they see money in there; there are a lot of reasons why they chose it. Sometime it is the influence of society. For others it is about drug addictions, getting back the power and so on” (SWI.AT.2.11).
In the Icelandic social system, some women have chosen prostitution because of financial problems. For several reasons which intra/inter act together, some encounter financial issues due to difficulties in finding a job due to a lack of education, the need for more money can be in relation to debt, loans, studies, family etc. In addition to these multi-factors, can be inadequate assistance from social services. It is similar for the women who have to sustain their drug addictions, which most of the time intersects with previous traumatized experiences for which they didn’t receive adequate support.

**How do they got out of there**

“If someone would ask me while I was in prostitution: ‘do you like it?’ of course I would answer: ‘of course I love it, I get money and I love sex’. But when you stop, then that is the time while things get clearer like ‘ok, this is not what I want, this is not so awesome’, I get money, power and everything but I think when you are in that you are getting stuck there, somewhere. I stopped because something was just beyond me. But I think these women who are saying they like the prostitution, are just mentally damaged and there is something definitely wrong […]” (S.5a.66);

Another said: “When you are in prostitution you have to comfort yourself and give you good reason to survive” (S.2a.43).

These testimonies reflect the embedment into the prostitution and the denial of the self and emotions. Before leaving or even seeking help, all of my participants felt over their limits: “I just had enough, with each client; it gets harder, so much harder (silence) I felt gross, I couldn’t handle anything […] there was something saying ‘no, no more’, I was getting worse, I got nervous, I couldn’t go out of my house […] I felt this is just destroying my life” (S.5a.65).

Despite the survival strategies women have used, exemplified by their testimonies such as “I have never been raped because I was pleasing them” (S.5a.62); “I always went with guys who have money, married. Because I thought it would be kind of safe if they are married they won’t talk about it, they would keep it to themselves” (S.1a.5).

All of the survivors seek Stígamót assistance to get out of prostitution and develop their understanding of the system they were embedded in. “Here at Stígamót, we try to make them explain how it was, just explain. Sometimes it is just one sentence. But if you gain their trust they might talk further with you, and see their life from another spectrum” (SWI.E.6. 13). With this quotation, I take the opportunity to stress that this empowering approach requires staff members to develop an intersectional view on individual and social development; which means being open and ready to understand that some women who have been exposed to prostitution in other ways, and react in different ways as well, according to their personal history, background, education, ‘culture’ and so on.
All of my participants have been in counselling and four of them have participated in Swan group sessions. Some have started the counselling and Swan group while they were still selling themselves or having a break from prostitution. After various periods of time spent reflecting, all of those decided to definitely leave prostitution. For them it is univocal, Stígamót has changed their life, and for most has saved their life. However, leaving prostitution hasn’t been that easy, as survivors testify:

“I started here at Stígamót for sexual abuse, after 2 years talking to my counsellor I could finally tell her that I have been in prostitution […] during this 2 years while meeting my counsellor I wasn’t in prostitution, I was just in counselling, using everything she told me and make me realize about myself, but couldn’t tell her because of the shame. It was a bigger shame to tell someone that you have been in prostitution, selling your body to men” (S.2a.37).

Such as reminded by Gayle Rubin (1984: 270) the prostitutes were, and still are, considered as the ‘other’ in the sense other than the normalized and acceptable people, Ulla Bjørndahl stated “The women themselves are aware that they are unwanted, which leads to feelings of shame and a perception of stigma” (Bjørndahl 2012:45). So even if the person has taken a break or has already stopped prostituting, it is still hidden and hurting the self. A social worker argues: “We know it is a lot of shame. The most important consideration through the counselling is to make the women understand why they did it. Understand the reason for having chosen something particular. So my job is to help the person to forgive themselves and understand that it is not their fault, neither was it their real choice” (SWI.E.6. 13). The women are entangled in the social and normalised norms, they are aware of the ‘wrong’ action they do or did. With the empowerment from the counselling sessions and Swan groups, they will realize that it is a burden that society wants them to carry on; the shame relies on the social construction they have embodied. Indeed, their participation in the Swan group seems to be a very comforting place where women can tell everything and feel understood, a survivors states: “I thought it was very relieving, that I was not the only alien in the world; there were other girls and women that were like me. We all have different stories but we have the same consequences, this is amazing” (S.3a.32).

I have also noticed from both survivors’ and staff members’ testimonies that many women cannot recognize themselves as being into prostitution, often because they have a different notion of what prostitution is. Therefore, those who have sexual intercourse in exchange for a couch, drugs, mobile phone… cannot recognize themselves in the trade. Indeed, prostitution encourages the women to advertise themselves. Yet, these women do not since they do the material/services ‘exchanges’ with friends, family members, etc. Therefore getting out is about
questioning oneself and the values each individual acts upon. It is about changing all the values and beliefs system in which people have lived in and taken for granted up to now. “These things take time, time to realize, to look in the mirror, and realize and say out loud that you have been selling your body, and in many ways maybe” (S.2a.44); “we all have to find it in our heart to feel we are ok to tell to someone” (S.2a.39).

Through counselling, the survivors gained more confidence, reinforced their self-esteem thereby developing their self-confidence and quality of life. To understand that mechanism and how both staff members and survivors work in the organization, I will detail their interaction with Stígamót.

**Their interactions with Stígamót**

The interaction of survivors with Stígamót has two poles, one is via the counselling session and group therapy such as the Swan group, the second is their participation in Stígamót projects such as volunteering at Kristina House, the Champagne Club, Big Sister, Women Strike and their contribution at Stígamót empowerment.

On reflecting the previous point, starting counselling is not easy and requires a lot of strength and willingness. The interaction is based on feminist empowerment where the staff members help the survivors to work by themselves and for themselves, such as Tengland (2008: 93) illustrated while defining the empowerment intra-action between a person (A) who supports another (B) in order to increase the knowledge and capabilities of B.

A social worker expressed:

“Because people come to us with shame and self-hatred, guilt, low self-esteem and so on, we help them to realize they are ‘normal’ that the abuser was not ok, what happened was not ok, but they are ok. We do everything to increase people’s self esteem. At first in our work at Stígamót, we were focusing on sexual abuses, and then we realized that people were in prostitution, trafficked or in the porn industry, we have learned and realized from their experience and narrative that prostitution, pornography and sexual trafficking are sexual abuses and we observed they have developed the same consequences as for sexual abuses such as rape and incest. They taught us it was that way” (SWLT.5.17).

A survivor clarified:

“Then I called Stígamót and they helped me, this is how I started here. And I had started prostitution by then, but I didn’t tell them for two months, I was just talking about this thing that happened. And never talked about the prostitution, it was the shame at that point, I thought she would judge me because I hadn’t told anybody at that time, I did not expect to tell anybody,
because I felt so abnormal in some way. And when I told them they said: ‘ok, let’s talk about that’, there were no problems. I felt like normal and they told me about the Swan group that was gonna start in the fall and I said ‘yes, thank you, I want to meet other girls like me’. Ah! And that is how the Swan group helped me, that meeting other girls like me and makes me feel normal that is maybe why I feel how I feel now, because I met these girls. Yes, that is one way how it helped me” (S.1a.12).

In the survivor speech, the shame is again affirmed; this shows how powerful the entanglement of people and subordination is for some in the bio-power regime, which among many other power differentials, is a system that blames the people for the acts they had or have in regard to the rules and social norms created by a minority of powerful people who participate at the settlement of a particular bio-power system itself always in movement, transformation.

Prostitution considered as a form of deviant sexuality (Rubin 1984: 269); Foucault asserts, rather than being something given in human nature, sexuality is a formation and the result of a complex network of relations of power and knowledge, intertwined into a bio-political system (Foucault 1978:12 in Kristensen 2013: 35).

In relation to the initial question of this chapter how both staff members and survivors work in the organization for change? Their experiences related testimonies show that the dynamic at Stígamót is based on close collaboration between staff members and survivors through different activities based on discussion such as in counselling and Swan group sessions; the discursive intra-actions between counsellors and survivors induce empowerment and understanding of the social hegemony and normativities that lead to, among others, shaming discourses for survivors, and women’s oppression at a social level. The understanding of embedment into normalised practices is the beginning of change. Often raised in their reflections, pornography and prostitution are connected; I will try to explain its connection in the following section.

2. How are prostitution and pornography connected?

Using Rubin words, “sex as vector of oppression” (1984: 293) is based on power-discursive practices. Indeed, in the discourses take place the power relations, the more powerful discourses will emerge and be used to formulate norms hence laws, which will determinate cultural practices and what is acceptable or not to perform in society. On that basis, a bio-power system i.e. the matrix, including: hegemonies, empowerment of some and disempowerment of others. In the bio-power system, people will identify and develop practices where the body becomes social and acts upon the power of political technologies. e.g. to illustrate the entanglement to the bio-power system, people expressed themselves bodily according to the system/ matrix, their sexuality is inscribed in a constructed system including power imbalance relations rather to
connect their sexuality and desires to their inner self, they will refer to pornography and will therefore meet the expectation of the bio-power-system. One survivor said: “Guys think it is sexy when you gag […] this gagging is straight from porn, porn influences a lot guys’ ideas about sex” (S.1a.15) “because it is in the porn movies, some have horrible fantasies, some men were asking to play the role of a rape victim” (S.1a.6). With the venue of internet, and easy access to information, a vast majority of people are educated through the porn industry, freely available on the web. Another survivor argues: “the porn (silence) it gives these little guys ideas on how sex is supposed to be […] porn is not a realistic view of sex, it is totally not” (S.1a.14).

A study made by Sweden based public health and caring sciences professor Tanja Tydén, and head of the RFSU Clinic, Stockholm, Christina Rogala states that “men visiting a genito-urinary clinic in Sweden were interviewed about their sexual behaviour and use of pornography. Of the 296 men who had seen pornography, 53% said watching porn had “inspired” them (2004: 590).

Pornography emerged from powerful discourses have engendered a porn-culture, which is obviously not the responsible for sexual violence against women. However, when looking at its creation and transformation into perversion and violence, it is possible to claim that pornography is a means that reinforces misogyny. I am intersecting, pornography, normativities and sexual violence since all have been discursively constructed according masculine hegemony, validated by politics and legislations to perpetuate sexual oppression on some.

According to Stigamót, “it is clear that pornography, prostitution and trafficking are three faces of similar violence” (Stigamót Annual report 2013:19). Stigamót claims that the “25 women who have stayed with them at the shelter, have taught them much about the porn world” (ibid.); they are therefore well informed for claiming that pornography influences the violence of prostitution since it is the survivors of that sex-business who have testified and condemned the wide sex industry including prostitution and pornography.

I am arguing for a gender-equal society in which survivors of sexual violence are empowered and where women are not subjected to violent sexual practices and not linked to commercial products consumed by men. Therefore, I am not referring to sexual practices in itself, rather on their construction and re-signifying which have heavy consequences for a category of people, mainly women. In an empowerment process, if norms construction is understood, their de-

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construction and transgression will be facilitated, hence escaping norms, or at least being aware that normativities exist, being able to recognize them and choosing to identify with them or not. This process is embedded into empowerment and offers the possibility to become who they are rather than become someone fitting into social constructions. For example, being able to recognize that pornography and prostitution are socially constructed norms and that all women and men do not have to conform to them is quite relieving since it opens the ‘door’ for other possibilities and choices.

3. How do individuals mobilize empowerment from their experience?

The empowerment includes the understanding of things, mechanisms, behaviours, beliefs, norms, etc. Understanding these is a means to deconstruct and transgress the norms people are themselves embedded in; since the condition terms change, their signification in symbolic representation is therefore different as well, indeed, the symbolic representation of clients and perpetrators are highly different in the context of sex buying. For example, through the empowerment process, behaviour, condition and position, will be re-signify, accordingly, ‘victims’ of sexual violence is instead understood as ‘survivors’; ‘clients’ or ‘customer’ leads to ‘perpetrators’; and ‘prostitution’ in an empowering relation context become ‘sexual violence’. Therefore, the re-signification of the practices/terms will intersect with each another and intra-act as well. Since the intersections have changed their ‘original meaning’, the impact of intersection will be different. For example, before the empowerment, the intersection of victims, women, and perpetrators while intersection/interaction, their action resulted in a regime of oppression entangled into the prostitution. The subordination is induced with the term ‘victim’, the term ‘clients’ which is a respectable position, influence a normalization and a rationalization of the buyer’s conduct in prostitution. By transgressing those ‘normalized terms’ and by re-signifying the actions, they would become survivors, women and perpetrators. The new intersection of elements engenders new understandings; leading to the induction of oppression via the intra-action dynamic of those new elements/terms. The difference is that the oppression is symbolically expressed through the term ‘perpetrator’ rather than by the ‘victim’. The use of perpetrators and victims, show signs of empowerment since their intersection can be inscribed in a context of sexual-violence rather than prostitution. In this intersection dynamic, the symbolic representation associated to perpetrators does not allow an acknowledgement and a valorisation of the action performed and neither a normalization of it; indeed, to rationalize the actions of perpetrators is harder than to rationalize the actions of a client.
Society should recognize the consequences of abuses and prostitution in order to change the ‘norms’, a social worker claims: “It is very important for a good society to take care of people and look at sexual violence which greatly influence the well being of a society” (SWI.AT.2.9).

In accordance with the Foucault perspective on power as a discursive practice, two opposite possibilities among others are available: to act along the discourses (such as patriarchy and misogyny) of the bio-power system hence reinstall and reinforce the power relations in which identity practices are acted upon, or; to deconstruct the normative identity markers and power differential discourses. Developing awareness, self-esteem in order to transgress the norms and install the capacity to act upon the self, therefore develop the power-within and power-over. Sharing ideas and developing further with other people. Together with developing actions such as advocacy through projects, profession, lobbying, etc. so as to enhance the power to create an individual or collective action. A survivor expresses:

“It was just so awesome to be able to help them and talk about you know, your resiliency and I was just giving advice, and you know, it was so liberating, I felt like ‘ok this is my purpose here, I am gonna do something with this’ so it was awesome. I am so grateful they have started this group. I am looking for, maybe I can help with another group one day. I can lead group or be assistant” (S.5a.60).

“If I stop and think about how I was when I started in the Swan group the first time, it has been very much change. I couldn’t even express myself (silence) enough (silence) I just couldn’t do it. Now I can. I gained confidence. It has been so much change” (S.3a.32).

Along with their empowerment and the acquisition of self-esteem and the power to achieve things, the survivors, wish to go further in their agency and develop their abilities to work collectively and mobilize others. Those last are expressed by their involvement with others in the creation of a project “I am excited to find a place to work in where I can work with those things I have, because I think that is a big part of the recovery, like coming to you and saying: ‘ok, I need to do this, it is good for me, good for her, good for everybody to get this out’” (S.5a.56). But for many, continuity in the process of empowerment is also about finding a profession calling for the use of experience:

“This is hard experience but useful if you use it to help others. When I came with the drugs and prostitution and all the things (silence) I was about to take my life off. Then when I started to go to the AA and at Stígamót, I realized and decided that I wanted to go through all of this. But it took a lot of time. I am sure I can help some. I want to work at international level as well but not on political, I don’t like the camera, but I like to be with people and talk to women” (S.2a.49).

Some survivors are already working as volunteers at the Shelter Kristina House or wish to work at Stígamót, others choose to invest their experience in a profession such as educator, doctor in a rape crisis centre, and so on.
“Working here makes feel so good. It makes my experience purpose. It is like helping other women in that situation give my experience purpose like (silence) because (silence) my experience in prostitution doesn’t serve any purpose other than just deal with yourself on daily basis, and go to counselling and blah blah blah, but it gives you purpose if you work with helping others. I think it is something that I had to do” (S.3a.33).

Certainly they all gained awareness and learned how to use their experiences in a positive ways translated in expertise on sexual abuses and prostitution. Hence they want to use their practical knowledge for helping others. After various periods of time in counselling, one argues:

“I am getting the power back […] Today, after these 2 years in counselling, I know that I can make the demand, I am not going do things because I can or can’t but because I want. I choose now, I am not gonna be chosen ever again. It has always been like that before I have been chosen and I have never chosen for myself, so now I get out of that, at last!” (S.5a.55).

This powerful testimony shows how power has become part of their lives, and that they are not subjected anymore to others’ norms, laws, ‘culture’, etc. They have the power to be self-efficient, to control their own lives, they have gained the tools to deconstruct and transgress the norm they do not want to conform to, in this whole bio-power regime.

On the staff members side, they claim that developing survivors’ self-esteem, which is according to them the foundation for further actions toward the self, others and society, in other words, toward empowerment. Regarding their vision on agency, the focus is made on dialogue, each of them mention that opening the dialogue with people, approaching ministers, parliamentarians, police officers, etc. by means of private meetings, conference. One counsellor states: “We have had rape, sexual abuse and porn for centuries but this doesn’t mean it is ok. It is important to discuss things and deconstruct the ‘normalities’” (SWI.T.5.19). To catch the attention of the population they make use of the media, lecture at schools, seminars, etc. Talking with people is a great way to open the dialogue and deconstruct the cultural/societal/political discourses about prostitution and in a broader term deconstruct the normalization of sexual violence. This process is intersectional since many factors are taken in consideration. It implies that the deconstructive dialogues proceed along different sections and directions. To that end, considering the empowerment of survivors via the counselling sessions as the major part of Stígamót’s work, the reinforcement of survivors’ empowerment is then followed by working the ‘outside’ environment of the survivors, therefore at a structural level. Indeed, it is great to empower the self, but if the bio-power structural system does not get changed, it will be in opposition and impact negatively on survivors’ empowerment. Stígamót strives for awareness in civil society, the politicians, lawyers, police officers, teachers, and each individual, of what prostitution and sexual violence are. To that end, the dialogue should be opened in order to breaks the limitations of the norms, allow the survivors to talk about their prejudice more easily and offer people a tool
for increasing their awareness regarding prostitution and dockside. As an example, Stígamót argues that if a person is raped, they will talk much easier to relatives, friends, and social assistant, etc. because rape is acknowledged as a crime since it has been discussed for many years now and people know about it. Therefore, prostitution seems to be more difficult to repeat in an Icelandic context, but is still highly embedded into the norms, stereotypes and myths which are among others: the happy hooker, entering in prostitution is a choice, etc. However, due to the multiple intersections, the person who ‘decided’ to enter prostitution was not in a good mental/economical state to make deliberate choice. As mentioned previously, the notion of choice can be discussed; choosing from a sample of pre-decided choices is not a deliberate choice due to the restriction (Kabeer 2001: 24). According to the beliefs associated with prostitution, people feel ashamed and are forced to live partly hidden, therefore cannot speak about their suffering. One social worker says: “The empowerment of women goes through talking about the affect of prostitution in society just getting the society to understand it better and maybe assist those people in a better way. To erase stereotypes and exclusion...” (SWI.AT.2.12). To that end, in order to catch people’s attention and increase awareness and changes, Stígamót makes use of intersectional means with prostitution as a nodal point, such as the Champagne Club, Big Sisters, Slut Walk are just examples of their actions16.

According to Stígamót, the best way to empower women is first of all give them time, then it is about building self-esteem through counselling and group sessions, this results in them stopping feeling ashamed. They try to help women to normalize the reasons they have been in prostitution (because they need the money, they need power, etc.). One social worker argues:

“It is about making them accept the reason they have been pushed in that direction. Women often feel responsible for their choices but they couldn’t make real choice, to them the range of choice was limited to prostitution. They did not think about education, university, this is because they had a very low esteem. Now, they have developed the capacity to make real and many more choices, they can realize and thrust themselves. This is a way to empower them. Build back their self-esteem. But that is very slow because most of them have been sexually abused previously as well” (SWI.AT.2.9).

Returning to the initial question of this chapter: how does an individual mobilize empowerment from their experience? With reference to the studies of Pardasani (2005: 117) and Oxaal and Baden (1997: 2), it is observed that the empowerment, at a personal level (or micro) is primarily done with the interaction between the survivors and counsellors, their collaboration enables the development of self-esteem and power-over one’s life; subsequently, based on the attaining of

16 Further information about the Champagne Club and the Big Sister project are referenced in the Bibliography.
power at a micro level, it allows and provides the tools (self-esteem/ control over one’s life including strength, determination, awareness, ..) to work at the empowerment at structural level for both survivors and staff members. In so doing, there is the strengthening of the power-with (the collective via the Swan group for the survivors and alliances in networks for Stígamót) and the power-to (all the actions undertake by both the survivors and Stígamót members) which result in increasing group consciousness, hence social empowerment. Relying on intersectionality as a process of mutual constructions and transformations, argued by Lykke (2010:71), the intersectionalities provide a processual understanding of the mutual transformations of both Stígamót work and survivors’ empowerment having effect on the macro/structural level.

To respond to the initial question: How do individuals mobilize empowerment from their experience? It is to say that the empowerment cannot be pre-defined nor planned, it is a non-chronological process, relying on individual capacities and abilities to reach their inner power in order to develop the four forms of power (Charlier & Caubergs, 2007: 10) which do not have chronological order, and they influence and reinforce each other by inter-acting and intra-acting. Both in development or feminist agencies, it is a process where the promoters of empowerment should adapt the disposable tool according to the changing needs of women. This is precisely what Stígamót achieves: the staff members never fixed the services provided, their resources and their aims. The social workers always question their techniques, positions, project through survivors’ experiences, strong group cohesion and their self-empowerment as well. By doing so, they challenge themselves and the organization continuously, in order to become better, according to the current situations, needs, and participants, etc. hence both their political and grass-roots action are reinforced and up to date. The following question, leads to the further understanding of this processual change.

4. **How does Stígamót participate to the enhancement of gender equality in Icelandic society?**

American Feminist Theorist, bell hooks, denounce in *From Margin to Center*, the condition of “women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually- women are powerless to change their condition in life. They are the silent majority (hooks 2000: 1 in Lykke 2010: 168). Whatever their situatedness and differences, many women encounter similar conditions, the diverse intersections which enforced their “position at the margin” should be taken into the consideration of social work methodology, intersectional thinking should be compatible with empowerment in order to let women come from the margin to the centre (ibid.).
Stígamót, qualified itself as having the following goals:

“Doing two things: Being a political organization, trying to change society while offering quality services for women and some men who have been sexually abused. This is really what we are trying to do. [...] We have changed from being a place where only survivors could have work here, into becoming an organization more institutionalized, with professional women and some of us have their own survival experiences of course as women always do. At the same time we are trying to be faithful to the old visions of the women’s movement as being political and feministic. I don’t know how we succeed, but we are really trying to do both things” (SWI.G.1.9).

Stígamót members do assemblage in their work with two main elements: lobbying and front-line work. This produces a completely different dynamic of working. Both elements co-exist/ intra-act and the front-line tasks nourish the advocacy construction, the perceptions gained from the field are always changeable and never fixed, always mutually transformed. That ‘philosophy’ will never freeze and become structural instead, their work rests on processual development therefore, and the team of Stígamót is always in the process of learning, empowering and enhancement.

The new assemblages made with the intersection of the survivors voices and their observations intra-act and generate new meanings and new thoughts; which modify and deconstruct both the symbolic representations of oneself and those that others have.

The deconstruction occurs via dialogue in counselling sessions and through lobbying actions as well, Stígamót challenges negative ways of thinking into the development of positive meaning (Lykke 2010: 34). According to one social worker: “More discussion is always needed and important because it helps to understand things and change one’s own perception” (SWI.AT.2.12).

At Stígamót, they do education/ deconstruction of social media and its effects. They go to different places such as high school, college, seminars, etc. to give lectures. “With talking about our work (sexual abuse, prostitution, pornography) people start to think about it. Everything should be discussed because through the discussion, people can realize what is going on there, and change. But it takes time” (SWI.AT.2.11).

I have been amazed to hear how much experiences (both personal and professional) help the staff members to build a strong team. These bounds and solidarity always make them stronger and motivate them to go further in their quest for a society ‘free of violence’. An emphasis is made on creativity, in opposition to the liberal doctrine, at Stígamót, imagination and derision are important tools to support their work and push them on to continue and find new ways to cross the barriers that stand in front of them. “Here, we have a meeting once a week. Nothing is done /
decided before the team know about it” (SW1.E.6.13); their collaborative and intersectional work is not limited to the members of Stígamót, they have created numerous alliances with other organisations in Iceland which support women’s rights but also made connections with other countries. According to one staff member, everything comes from the shelter movement, she says:

“We come from the Nordic movement. When we started the 1st women’s shelter in Reykjavik in ‘82 and the very first was in Oslo on ‘78. There, women had their own place where they could define their lives. They started to see their personal life and experience in a socio-political context. From the beginning, the policy has been: 1) to be a place for battered and sexual abused women, now we take men as well because boys are raped. All the services are free of charge for them. 2) We wanted to change every aspect in a society that makes violence possible. And we wanted to advocate for our women” (SWI-G.1.1.6).

In agreement with this, here is a voice about their intra-action:

“We create a network with the people we should work with, in relation to the actual project e.g. prostitution, trafficking. When starting a new project such as the shelter Kristina house, we really need to learn from others and their experience about the trafficking, we needed to tell them about the patterns here in Iceland and they tell us what they were doing in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Instead of working alone in each single country, we make connections; it makes sense to our work” (SWI.G.1.8).

I understood their work as the creation of new assemblages in order to generate new meanings regarding the experience of each of them in relation to survival experience consequently to enhance agency of both women and society in broader way.

The dialogue Stígamót provokes among civil society and politicians leads people to question their habits, their beliefs and thoughts. This dialogue is made through different actions such as the Champagne Club, the Women’s Strike Day, The slut Walk, Big Sisters and others. They make the link between their experience with violence and the events are made to raise awareness about what is happening in Iceland and each event is a demand for change at societal level. One says:

“People know us, we gain respect for our work, we have developed great advocacy and we make the links between violence and prostitution, between our experiences and actions. People don’t dare to question us because we know violence, because we have working with violence and make the links; it is really hard to disagree with us” (SWI.G.1.1.6).

A survivor reinforce that statement by saying: “the experience is here, at Stígamót, they have solid concept. They have been here for so long and gather so much knowledge” (S.2a.45).

Stígamót ‘s quest for challenging the ‘bio-power’ discourses, and bringing all the women together to mobilize for their rights is intense. Accordingly, they have started raising
consciousness and advocacy in every way possible, doing all kinds of training projects and political work with politician, media and schools.

One example of a current action is the Champagne Club, launched in the summer of 2013 at Stígamót:

“We opened it to bring daylight to what was really going on in those champagne clubs. Because these clubs in Iceland are nothing other than brothels with signs of trafficking, this is why we are working against them. We invited the mayor of Reykjavik, the head of police, the government, all the parliamentarians and all members of the city council of Reykjavik, and of course media. Those are the most important people because they have the power and have the possibility to change. That is why we were working with them” (SWI-G.1.1.7).

Because they all received the same invitation and knew that all the others were invited, indeed Stígamót sent the copies of the invitation to both the media and politicians and everyone knew who was invited, they therefore could not ignore it. As a result this event started people thinking about what the champagne club is and its real trade. The effects can be very strong especially because of the approach Stígamót gives to the project. To that end, a few months after that event, one of the three clubs closed its doors and the tenants were arrested (Iceland Review, 27/10/201317). This is an example of the political action taken by the organization. One survivor says: “it should be like this everywhere. The women who are working here are fully committed to their jobs, involving their body, mind and soul; they are so brave to dare to do things they do such as the Champagne Club” (S.2a.46).

Another way of enhancing gender equality in Icelandic society is the afternoon tea at Stígamót. This event takes place every autumn before the parliament starts its work. A staff member explains: “We organized what we called intimate café or afternoon tea at Stígamót. This is not for everybody; to be invited to an afternoon café at Stígamót is something just for prioritized people” (SWI-G.1.1.7). They invite people who have the power and the possibility to make changes such as the ministers of health and interior ministries. At these private meetings, Stígamót provides explains the situation in Iceland regarding women and sexual violence:

“We point out what need to be changed: what laws should be changed, what practices, manners are needed, and they get to know everything that should be done. In that way, we have invited the head of police- the head of the health institution- the top of the social services– the head of childcare system in Iceland, just the people with most power” (SWI-G.1.1.7).

Last autumn, all the political parties at the parliament, were asked to send one representative to Stígamót in order to participate in a presentation of Stígamót actions and activities. At that

meeting, Stígamót had exposed what the ideal community is and what should be done to get there; the laws that have to be changed were presented as well.

“That autumn 2012, one discussion concerned the champagne clubs and the ban to sell private access to women for a short time and for a huge amount of money. All the parliamentarians went home with a piece of paper with all Stígamót wishes. Every year some of our cases are brought to the parliament, it has followed the same procedure for the law that criminalizes the buying of sex, it took about 10 years but we succeed” (SWI-G.1.1.7).

This example shows that the voice of Stígamót is influential and has a mutual transformative effect with politicians as well; parliamentarians listen to them, and contact them as a resource centre: “Stígamót is consulted on legal matters, we are heard, and we have a chance to express our priorities. When it concerns violence and sexual abuse, we provide information and sometimes they, the politicians, provide us with information. Then we have more information to create coherent work all together” (SWI.T.4.16).

To answer the initial question of this section which was: How does Stígamót participate in the enhancement of gender equality in Icelandic society? It has been shown in that part, the empowerment and the inter-relational effect of different side is visible; the survivors gained power by influencing Stígamót advocacy, aims and priorities; Stígamót is empowered as well and reinforces collaborative work with survivors, women’s movement and organization; they enhance their power to influence the structural spheres comprising powerful people such as politicians who have a direct influence on bio-power structures such as laws and education, which are two elements among others that contribute to the creation or modification of discourses. Such as argued by Foucault (in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983: 186), the power is multi-directional, here, it is operating in mutually influential and transformative ways such as from survivors (micro level) to Stígamót; Stígamót to politicians and from the structural spheres (macro) to the micro and endlessly to and fro. This process shows that change is based on co-responsibility; each participant of the system can act to transgress the bio-power-structure.

### 5. The construction of gender equality within Stígamót discourses

“We humans, try to rationalize everything, we can say it is just in the nature but if it is ok, why does it hurt? Why do people feel bad if it is natural? Saying that men cannot control their sexual impulse, is a weak answer. We are not animals; we can choose what kind of human being we want to be and we should take responsibility. What about saying that males can buy sexual intercourse and females cannot? What is that? As soon as a male has bought the woman, he has power over her, and this is definitely not a game or consenting sexual intercourse. Indeed, If one party doesn’t feel insecure and agree, it is sex. Rather, if one party is afraid, it is not sex, it is violence. It is a matter of education, if you grow up in a place where you have to do things that are qualified as normal, you will act according to this ‘normality’. For example: in some place if you are a man and don’t think about sex 24/7, you are not a man, I refer to masculinity. Also, in our society, women don’t learn to express their feelings regarding sexual intercourse. The gender differential education, affects people. Also the porn industry that interferes in people’s sexual
representation has become rationalized and became part of our education. It has very bad effects on teenagers, and children. Pornography interferes with their emotional life and it is bad for their development. We have had rape, sexual abuse and pornography for centuries but this doesn’t mean it is ok. It is important to discuss things and deconstruct the ‘normalities’. Usually people will say prostitution is ok, because there is a lot of money in this. (Same for weapons, drugs and porn industry) the money and the lowest risk is in porn and prostitution, it is also a fast way to make money. It is all about business and money” (SWI.T.5.19).

According to Foucault, “we need a new economy of power relations, in other words: since Kant, the role of philosophy is to prevent reason from going beyond the limits of what is given experience; […] the role of philosophy is also to keep watch over the excessive powers of political rationality” (Foucault 1983 in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983: 210). In accordance, an economy of power relations would limit the power exercised by some and limit its impact and use. It would have been fantastic to think that resonate people and make them use their ‘conscience’ might be enlighten an alternative. Here is what a Stígamót member thinks about:

“All can argue that buyers have a conscience; accordingly it is not acceptable to buy someone else even for a short period of time. We observed, in psychology, that people try to convince themselves that everything they do is ok, and normal. Humans rationalising things such as prostitution is nothing other than free will, sexual liberty, etc. rather than seeing is as sexual slavery. Why do some buy other human beings? It is also about the culture in a society, it relies on the patriarchy, and masculinity is everywhere. Sexual/prostitution culture is everywhere, such as patriarchy is” (SWI.AT.2.10).

However, Foucault argues that there is no use resonating this evident relation between rationalization and power, because “the field has nothing to do with guilt or innocence; it is senseless to refer to reason as the contrary entity of non-reason; then, such a trial would trap us into playing the arbitrary and boring part of either the rationalist or the irrationalist” (Foucault 1983 in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983: 210). On the contrary, in order to understand the links between rationalization and power, Foucault suggests an analysis which takes into account “the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point” (ibid.) it is about discovering the technique and form of power; power which is, in my case study, is being expressed with violence through the prostitution. He argues that:

“This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. [i.e. subject to someone else by control or dependence.]” (Foucault 1983 in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983: 210).

Following the analysis suggestion of Foucault and by changing the ‘individual’ word of this paragraph into ‘women in prostitution’; it would become that the technique of power used is violence expressed and manifested in prostitution, coupled with a misogynistic form of power;
this intersection drives the ‘women in prostitution’ to fit a specific category of subordination, designed by the bio-power-system to maintain disempowering relations.

The exercise of power makes the link between culture/social/political with prostitution, here is denounced the political power that sustains patriarchy which itself promotes and maintain women’s oppression by prostitution and many other means. Argued by Foucault, “our sexuality is linked to a specific form of power” (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983: 129), meaning that if prostitution is recognized as banal act and associated with a form of sexuality it is the consequence of people’s entanglement in the bio-power system, in which, as stated in the above quotation, individuals are constrained to become conditioned subjects. Accordingly, people rationalize because they have been thought that way. This is one of the multiple raisons which shows that a radical feminist change is needed, to that extend, Stígamót’ struggle is based on an educational project and is set against a power differential leading to domination, exploitation and submission of the individual to others. Stígamót translates the unequal power exercise on women as violence. Indeed, where power engenders harmful consequences, there is violence.

Following this reflection, prostitution as observed along the dissertation has harmful and devastating consequences for both the women-individuals and the society as a whole in which power differential is strong and segregate the sexes.

One counsellor says: “Even if violence is mainstreamed accepted as harmful, sexual exploration remains normal”. (G.1.1.4). This quotation shows that people do not recognize where the violence is taking place, and confirm their anchorage into the bio-power which does not recognize prostitution as violence.

Here is a dialogue of different social workers, reflecting on violence and how to tackle it.

“At Stígamót, we want to change every aspect in society that makes violence possible. In Iceland, we have a fantastic law against violence, one that criminalizes the purchase of sex, we should use it to its full potential” (SWI.G.1.1.6).

“Facts show that only 5% of children will talk about their sexual violence at school. They spend most of their time at school and can’t talk about that. It is important to open the dialogue. It is ok to talk about death, violence, sexual violence. It is important to talk about that, they have the capabilities to understand. Sex education is at 14, this is too late. It is important to talk about what is inappropriate and ok regarding boys and girls’ bodies. Talk about how our body develops, it is important to learn that sooner” (SWI.TB. 4.15).

“It is very important for a good society to take care of its people and look at sexual violence’s which influences a lot the well being of a society” (SWI-AT.2.9).

“Stígamót is a much respected organization in Iceland. It is the only organization here that has published that much about violence. Stígamót is the 1st organization people think about when
encountering sexual violence […] and it is the first which has started to work on the field of sexual violence using both front line and lobbyism. We are specialized in sexual violence and prostitution, so media, politicians want to hear what Stígamót has to say about the subject” (SWI.E.6.13).

“We make some people realize that sexual violence is a crime and the responsibility should go on the abuser. We avoid victimising people, we want to tell them they are strong, and there is nothing wrong with them. It is about making them realise that they are good people” (SWI.T.5.17).

To elaborate on gender equality Stígamót has constructed advocacy that shows the interrelations means such as prostitution, rape, harassment, incest that sustain violence and more precisely sexual violence among a majority of women and girls and minority of boys. Based on their experience they have come to make the links between education (bio-power system) and violent relations that impact on the welfare of a society. Their educational work goes further than teaching about consenting sex, it places its emphasis on violence and its various forms and link that violence to gender equality and gender stereotypes such as the ‘Slut Walk’ testify the existence of sexual and gendered stereotypes rationalizing violence among rapes.

The media have a role in that struggle since they are spreading information and participate in the education of people. The collaboration between a politician and a powerful person is crucial to the political power system impacting on the bio-power as a whole.

**Categorization and normative identity marker**

Taking into account that the culture/laws/codes of conduct, the society, the family norms, all together constitute the Bio-power and has been, according to Foucault, built upon discourses. In order to make some discourses acknowledged and more influential than others, the exercise of power is operated; the power differential makes some discourses prevail to some others. The strongest, will constitute normativities and will be taught to people and influence them in different ways. The discourses themselves have been based on intersectional elements and resulted in many different codes/ norms/ laws/ etc. which participated in the settlement of culture/behaviour. The culture, conditioning and beliefs of individuals are therefore based on intersectional factors such as different norms/codes/law (Dreyfus & Robinow 1983: 187). Taking prostitution as an example, which is embedded in intersectionalities, many factors induce its practice and perpetuation. A counsellor explains:

“Women have a very strong status in Iceland but like everywhere, in Europe, we all have the same media (music porno on internet…) everyone can access it. Also here and elsewhere, women should be pretty, slim, should be interested in sex, according to the music clips, porno, they have to follow the ‘norms’ this affects the status of women. It is important to educate people about the porn industry and about the support for women. Thinking that a woman should be pretty and cute is wrong. Like for men, they have to be strong, that is wrong. It affects all the people in the
It is important to deconstruct some stereotypes justifying behaviour such as violence in prostitution. For example, the symbolic representations associate prostitution in order to remove the guilt associated with its consumption/practice, the myths are that prostitution has always existed and is the oldest profession in the world, it says that without prostitution men would not be able to control their sexual drive therefore would commit more rapes, the stereotype associated with prostitution is also that women like that, it is a profession like another, it is a fair business in which ones gets paid for the sexual pleasure of others. In that context, a rape in a prostitution context is justify therefore tolerated since ‘she is a whore and is paid to satisfy the ‘client’s’ desire’, whatever the desire is. Based on the Belgian feminist, philosopher, linguist, psycholinguist, psychoanalyst, sociologist and cultural theorist, Irigaray, I argue that the linguistic creation of prostitution is a category produced by the system of phallogocentric in an effort to restrict women, their sexuality pleasure and dignity (Irigaray in Butler 1990: 26).

The consequences on society are that boys learn they can do what the media shows, they think they can buy women, and have power over them. Social workers explain it as such:

“If it is allowed that women are slaves and men are not as regular as women, that is not fair; the power difference and its intersections lead men to rationalise the violence against women: ‘these are just women so I can violent them’ […] To counteract these effects, we go to teachers, doctors’ schools, etc. we talk about our work at both Stigamôť and Kristina house. We also talk about how the media affects all of us” (SWI.AT.2.11).

Their discourses are based on trying to change the actual vision people have, for example

“What to do to avoid people’s rape rather than how I can prevent being raped. It is about educating people not to rape. We do the same with prostitution. Do the people who buy really know really they do? It is about opening discussion and raising consciousness” (SWI.AT.2.11).

Sexuality is shown everywhere in media contradictorily, it is not commonly discussed at least not to be included in educational programs in schools. Sexual practices are often classified as taboo, particularly prostitution such as one survivor asserts: “people are just blocking out the taboos and don’t want to talk about it, even mention it” (S.5a.65). Claiming for eternal unchanged and trans-historical, therefore taking prostitution as a guaranteed practice is highly limitative for gender equality. The property of one’s own body is not real since judgments regarding own or others bodies are influenced by societal discourses and created norms. Hence, in prostitution more than the half of the women involved in the trade cannot claim body property, on the contrary, all the women I met in my research context, claimed dissociation between body & mind; here is what survivors think: “it was that I didn’t exist and I took another place in my
head, I just draw myself in that hole, so I felt safe” (S.3a.27), and non-property of their body since it was sold: “you know and realize that when you get the money, the buyer owns you, and might do some bad things to you. You maybe try to stop this, but it is too late, he says: ‘shut up, I paid you’ […] he raped me” (S.2a.48). Moreover, living in a society with people who are claiming their own property wouldn’t be in agreement with the neo-liberalism ideology based on individualism? Therefore does this cause the valorisation of power over someone else?

In a world, where everything is interconnected and interrelated, information spread extremely fast to the four quarters of the globe, in such a way that people know via internet, TV, newspaper what is going on in other continents. However, the power differential leads to hierarchies in the transmission of information. Accordingly, pornography, online access to women from the four quarter of the globe is facilitated and increased, such as one survivor said: “it is easy to get access to prostitution” (S.2a.49). On the contrary, the access to information concerning sexual education, consequences of pornography, prostitution, misogyny, patriarchy, neo-liberalism, etc. will be restricted. Because of the power regimes, the powerful system will dominate. Outside of this dominated hegemony, are the radical, the transgressive and norm critical group/system/spheres, those excluded from the mainstream powerful bio-system are marginalized, their visibility among the population is limited, sometimes forbidden. In a system in which rapidity, efficiency and facilities are promoted, the system users access to the easiest, biggest, largest kind of information. In accordance, promoting the purchase of sex and the marginalization of the prostitute is easily accessible, even if looking for music on the web, sexual and pornographic images can pop up without having been asked for, on the contrary, explanations about consequences of prostitution and sexual abuses will never pop up when searching about music or something. Using a metaphor, the bio-power system can be represented as an octopus in which the tentacles are the intersection and the corpus the nodal point of ultimate power. Through its multiple tentacles, the octopus exercises a control over the entire system and expulses those who do not fit its ideal hegemony.

**How do individuals negotiate the power –laden relations?**

Taking into account Foucault’s perspective where power is a multi-directional process working along all vectors, recognizing that power is discursive and the people who act along the discourses reinstall the power relations associated (they fit to the norms). On the contrary, when people deconstruct and resist the discourses the hegemony is acknowledged. However, changing structural power relations takes a long time and I am asking the question if the empowerment of women wouldn’t be the beginning of a revolution? Such is happening in Iceland, where for
years, Stígamót has been struggling to challenge the ‘bio-power’ discourses, and bring all the women together to mobilize their rights. As a result, women have organized among others, a women-strike to remind the politicians and those embedded into the patriarchy, that power differential such as the pay-gap, is high violence against women which is intolerable (Stígamót report 2013: 18-20). To me those actions testify real women empowerment, which result in a bottom-up process where women continue to put pressure on the government to improve the laws that hamper gender-equality. Enforced with political willingness, legislation can be adapted to the recommendations given by the front-line. I would say therefore that empowerment is a bottom-up; top-down; bottom-up, and so on, an continual process where power goes in different directions, from different spheres and inter/intra-acting.

“Foucault points out that the juridical system of power produces the subjects they subsequently come to represent. Juridical notion of power appears to regulate political life in purely negative terms- that is, through the limitation, prohibition, regulation, control and even ‘protection’ of individuals related to that political structure through the contingent and retractable operation of choice” (Butler 1990: 2). Into this regulated political life, subjects are conditioned to fit to the regulation, control and illusionary protection (official declaration, working in a safe place such a brothel); where the choices are limited, I refer here to the notion of disempowerment, where in some contexts, people are under the illusion of being empowered and have gained the ability to make choices (Kabeer 2001: 18-19). In the context, the range of choices offered to my interviewees was limited to what the juridical/social system of power makes available to them. Such as Butler argues, “The subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures” (Butler 1990: 2). Nevertheless, since the power is dynamic and contingent, and that there are discourses that work along the line of power and engender forms of subordination, there are also other powers that resist bio-power regimes, such as they, as active victims, did when they challenged they social position and became empowered survivors. The resistance operates with a great deal of possibilities therefore the system can be challenged from both within and outside of it, so to say from personal victim/survivor and/or from collective/structural position.

“In the sex industry, women have been excluded from most production and consumption, and allowed to participate primarily as workers. In order to participate in the ‘perversions’, women have had to overcome serious limitations on their social mobility, their economic resources and their sexual freedom” (Rubin 1984:306). In other words, women are subjected to a form of bio-power structure, where they are disempowered; they act in accordance with the requirements of
these structures. They actually participate as ‘workers’ or to be more precise, as prostitutes. In order to participate and be included in that social construction, they should adjust themselves to the disposable society.

“[…] the juridical formation of language and politics that represents women as ‘the subject’ of feminism is itself a discursive formation and effect of a given version of representational politics” (Butler 1990:2) I would argue that the language and politics that represents women as disposable sexual objects to males is itself a discursive formation. Indeed, taking Sweden as an example, where the law has been applied for 15 years, the discursive formation and politics of representation have changed, women are more likely to be considered as individuals who may benefit the same rights as men. “Gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations” (Rubin 1984:306).

Taking into account the Icelandic case, the political system has taken measure to stop the sexual abuses notably by introducing the law that criminalizes the buyer of sex, however, many societies, such as Belgium is, do not take sufficient measures to stop sexual violence, which can be considered as affirmative of sexual violence among prostitution. As an example, when a new prostitution centre is opened and partly funded by the state, I doubt that the political measures are in favour of the well being of the prostitute or for global sexual violence prevention. Indeed, in those prostitution centres, a hierarchy is created where the women who could not afford a window will end up on the streets where the work is more precarious.

In my opinion, the dynamic power-juridical system that prohibits the purchase of sex has specific social manifestations which are dynamic and continuously transforming all the categories that intersect with it. It is a “set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity. (…) sex and gender identity as we know it is itself a social construct” (Rubin 1984: 307). As an example, sexuality, gender, power differential, violence, prostitution are all element/categories which are intersecting with the criminalization law of buying the sex element; sometimes, the elements are inter-acting and/or intra-acting, transforming each another; the effects of the transformation can be various in time and nature. To exemplify, if the intersectional elements such as gender, violence, sexuality and prostitution intra act with the intersectional element criminal law, the ‘law-element’ might transform the signifying and performance of the other intersections resulting in changing the

perception on prostitution. Indeed, the performance process of the acts assigned to male and female, affect the way sex is performed, the subordination or not induced in that performance, the rules, norms and belief associated to the sexual system. On the other hand, the sexual system itself is based on discursive practices “Foucault considers all sexuality to be constructed, the conventional no less than the deviant” (Rubin 1984:306), provokes gender-specific manifestation, usually, these manifestations function as privileging male over female, hence women-based violence, as one example.

Both sexuality and gender are social construct and constitute means of oppression for the socially constructed weak sex: the women. “Like gender, sexuality is political, it is organized into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others” (Rubin 1984:309). Accordingly, the construction of gender and sexual practices are organized in different ways in society and takes place notably through prostitution. In this sex-trade context, sexual practices are associated with violence toward ‘power-less’ individuals among women, girls, trans-people and all the other ‘deviant groups’ that do not fit into the patriarchal norms, and according to US sociologist professor Joane Nagel, those who do not behave according the “normative masculinity” including “willpower, strength, stoicism, competitiveness, sexual virility” (1998:6) and so on.

The role of organization such as Stígamót and the empowerment tool is to transgress this discursively constructed power system, it is about transgressing the binary of the pros and cons of prostitution, it is about transforming the social-discursive-power system.

Returning to the argument of Lykke (2010: 89), stating that intersectionalities are ‘doing’ so the intersections of my ‘power’ nodal point are all performed by individuals. According to Foucault, power has different forms and also operates differently, it can be positive or negative, constructive and destructive (Foucault in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983: 185-189). Applied to my study, power has constructive intersections which impact positively on people and society when it is about working on empowerment. For example, on survivors’ one, to give them back their personal power which will enable them to see other life possibilities and create in them the ‘willpower to know’ therefore allowing them to act and decide according to their own choices rather than in agreement with the social constrains. The negatives intersections of power are among many others, the violence, sexism, misogyny, prostitution, domination, patriarchy, etc. all those intersections or forms of power are issued from the bio-power system and given in the learning process of people.
Whatever their nature, all intersections, extensions and exercises of power are performed by individuals, each individual by the exercise of power, will have an impact on others. Accordingly, without questioning the power, neither owns embedment to bio-power system, people will reproduce what it has been given to them; such as a counsellor stated: “if you grow up in a place where you have to do things that are qualified as normal, you will reproduce the same. For example: in some place if you are a man and don’t think about sex 24/7, you are not a man” (SWI.T.5.19); it depends on what was normalized in the context people have grown in. Therefore, if a person has grown in an environment where watching porn is normal, then they will reproduce it and think it is normal as well, until something different / other forms of power hit them. Then a reflection or a reinforcement of one’s own position might be possible. In accordance, if an individual grows up in a socio/cultural environment which promote values such as self-esteem, power and gender equality, the way these people will perform the power will be completely different from those having been taught that buying sex is ‘normal’, that women are weaker then male, the consequences and exercise of the power will have an opposite impact. To that end, Social Sciences scholar, Kasper Simo Kristensen, Helsinki, argues:

“Foucault insists that power cannot be thought only in terms of laws or prohibitions and it is not enough to reduce power to sovereign-subject-model. […] In this sense power is not seen as being fixed into institutions or state apparatuses (police, courts and prisons) but is a name for those relations and practices by which human beings are, first, subjected to adopt certain social roles (students, workers, insane etc.). Second, power should be also understood as those relations by which the condition for human action is constantly changed (controls, legislations, individual responses etc.). Furthermore, according to Foucault every human relation includes also a power relation, although the form of this power may be different in sexual relationships and in political arguments (1997a, 283). This is to say that even if there are unequal power relations, they are always juxtaposed and thus modify each other. This is due to Foucault’s view according to which a power relation to even take place requires a possibility for an action upon the action of others. Thus total subordination is not power but a state of excessive domination without room for negotiation or reaction. (Foucault 1978: 94-95; 1982: 794.) In this sense bio-power is only a name or an analytical tool by which Foucault clarifies a specific set of practices and techniques that modify human life as a biological phenomenon” (Kristensen 2013: 15-16).

The bio-power can have good or bad consequences, is made from power and it is embodied and integrated by people via school education, at home, via the media, etc. All of these means of learning are extensions of priorities of political willpower.

Knowing that individuals identify with categories and norms produced themselves by the bio-power, that the bio-power has been consolidated through powerful discursive practices, would it be possible to shift the power on new discourses and thereby initiate a bio-power which
promotes the inner-self rather than the social/political/cultural system? Do the methods used by Stígamót given time and perseverance change the matrix?

I would argue, as an attempt to discuss my section question: how does Stígamót makes use of gender equality discourses? That the consequences of their work are positive and powerful since laws against violence exist, powerful people make an effort and change slightly their perceptions and discourses, more men take their responsibilities regarding male violence against women, educational school system slightly changes as well. Much willpower is still needed to approach the ‘ideal society free of violence’ that Stígamót is promoting and struggling for.
Concluding discussion:

Answering the main research question: *How an abolitionist organization is working with survivors’ empowerment to the enhancement of a gender-equal society?* At the end of the analysis, I can argue it is on behalf of their grass-root experiences with survivors from sexual violence among prostitution and trafficking that the organization has developed strong advocacy in favour of a gender-equal society free of violence. As stated in the analysis, they came to render their work public hence have discursively informed civilians through media, conferences, events, seminars, etc. It is with long lasting discursive practices and collaborative work with survivors and other organizations, that Stígamót has induced awareness among people and politicians therefore pushed the implementation of the ‘Swedish law’ as a first strong and structural change. Further actions are continuously launched to enforce the law, lower down violence, power differential and enhance gender equality.

Indeed, research on the law which criminalizes the purchase of sex, e.g. in Sweden and Iceland, has revealed a link between power differential and perpetuation of prostitution, the law has therefore shown its effects, in particular in Sweden, in term of reducing sexual violence. According to Swedish lawyer and feminist activist, Gunilla Ekberg, it is important to question patriarchal structures and thereby analyze the power assigned to gender roles and observe how it influence and affect both sexes. To recognize the beneficiary of power relations, the question used to implement the law in Sweden was: “who does this benefit?” As a result, measures were taken to redress and balance the situation. “We’re talking about a situation of male domination where there are different forms of oppression that are keeping women down” (Ekberg 2008:5). A research report made by Charlotta Holmström and May-Len Skilbrei for the Nordic Gender Institute, demonstrates that “societal, and structural inequality explain prostitution. Society’s task thereby becomes to regulate and combat this inequality through legislation” (2008: 32), this same research shows that the law has contributed to a decrease in the number of sex buyers “In the 1996 study, 13.6% respondents reported having experiences with the purchase of sex. In a 2008 study, 8% reported paying for sex at some point” (Holmström & Skilbrei 2008: 29).Regarding the number of women who are still active in the trade in Sweden, it is “approximately 300 women who work as street prostitutes and about 300 people who advertise on the Internet. It is uncertain how many people are victims of trafficking. Groups working with prostitution have noted a successive decline in street prostitution over the last ten years. It is
clear that the prostitution market has changed and is increasingly becoming more differentiated” (Holmström & Skilbrei 2008:15).

Obviously, the positive impact of this law is closely linked to the means used to redress the power imbalance, that is to say tackle the buyers and sellers. In other words, the application and implementation of the law that criminalize the purchase of sex is based on strong political will to change the social power arrangement, set correct priorities and find adequate resources. The same observation has been made by both survivors and social worker at Stígamót.

Following the narratives of survivors and social worker, it is seems that entering prostitution is always influenced by societal facts ruled themselves by patriarchal structures, power differential and norms. The reasons to enter prostitution are diverse, and can be linked to limited amount of alternatives while confronted with financial needs, self neglect, the need to please, mental disease, addictions and so on. In addition, the international figures show that most of the survivors of prostitution and sexual abuse are facing heavy consequences such as emotional numbing, personality dissociation, schizophrenia, feeling of insecurity, constant fear, disgust, self-image destruction, isolation, suicide, guilt, etc. (WHO 2012: 2). The interviews I conducted at Stígamót, have confirmed the dramatic consequences and the unwillingness to enter into prostitution. The figures provided by Stígamót, collected each year and based on their daily experience, confirm that many women are forced by different means to enter prostitution, therefore the notion of ‘choice’ is annulled. Indeed, every survivor I interviewed and all the survivors who sought help at Stígamót had never claimed choosing prostitution because they were craving to sell sexual services! One survivor has argued: “some of the women don’t have the choice, they have economical problems, but it doesn’t mean they have liked it” (S.1a.8).

Ekberg’s statement reinforces survivors’ voices saying: “Those who are pro-prostitution of course ignore power differences between men and women. They boil prostitution down to individual choice. If you analyze choice you recognize that choice is only possible if you choose from equal alternatives. You have to distinguish between making a decision and having a genuine choice” (2008: 4). This observation is pretty similar to the analysis on empowerment made by Kabeer (2001:24) when she denounces not taking into account the limiting imposed choice women are confronted with in the context of development projects.

Regarding their empowerment from victim to survivor position and their involvement in collective action; based on de Beauvoir, Butler stated “women are in an endless becoming process” (1990: 33), I agree, and argue that everybody is in a process of becoming; empowerment can have different stages and times, people will never stop changing, becoming
who they really are and allowing the emergence of their inner-selves. Always the power will touch us and impact on us differently. The discursive practices are in continuous change, leading to different positions of power; also resulting in transformation of the bio-power system. Transgressing the bio-power regime through the language itself challenges power. Therefore the power regime challenged, will impact on the intersections which are intra-acting with the power differential regime. And progressively will transform the power imbalance such as domination, violence, patriarchy, sexism, etc.

Therefore, to answer my second research question: *How does Stígamót, based on their experiences, elaborate ideas such as change and equality and how do they manifest these changes?* At this stage of the thesis, I can say it is the intra-actions of survivors with Stígamót staff members through the counselling sessions that their mutual transformation occurs and are contributing to develop the advocacy and the lobbyism actions which aim at transgressing and challenging the actual bio-power regime practices. The modifications of forms of power induce a radical feminist change in order to enhance people’s well-being and a welfare society.

The empowerment and agency of people generated by the strategic work of Stígamót, always based on survivors’ experiences, brings about political changes in order to impact on power relations and binary discursive structures hence challenge normative social representations. It is the deconstruction of these norms associated with gender imbalance in term of power positions in society, which lead to the understanding of the construction of social inequalities.

The previous studies resumed in the thesis chapter, suggest that numerous documents exist in the empowerment field. However, when it comes to narrow these down to specific intersections such as survivors, prostitution and political changes, the number of studies diminishes. Empowerment of people in prostitution is a research subject that has been widespread as a goal in empowerment practices, fulfilling some quality-of-life-determinant and is presented by development institutions. When it comes to feminist approaches, empowerment as a process for survivors/victims and prostitution can be found. However, few emphasize the use of the intra-action (Lykke 2010: 71) and mutual transformation/empowerment including counsellors and survivors. Most of the analysis completed in relation to organization (development agencies) which have had structural and economical development objective, were focusing on self-esteem, the capacity to get organized with others and take action; those action plans were politicized for economical aims. Regarding feminist organization which lay the stress on survivors’ empowerment, usually the focus is made on self-confidence and the capacity to get organized with others, creating projects as an example. In that context, there is a shift between individual
support and political manifestation. In both contexts, feminist organization and development institutions, limit their objectives while working towards survivors of sexual violence’s empowerment. Indeed I would like to see more studies of organization that combine their political actions with first line work with women including the enhancement of self-esteem, the ability to take action and be critical towards the system, besides the abilities to develop collective consciousness raising that may impact on politics.

I suggest that prostitution and sexual trafficking (which are linked since the trafficking fuels the demand for prostitution) creates an imbalance of gender position in societies hence is a societal problem that touches all of us. Talking and writing about such an issue is education and it tends to bring new perspectives and arguments in favour of a gender-equal society through women’s experiences and empowerment, placing emphasis on survivors of sexual violence among prostitution. Getting out of the victimized status to the survivors one and develop agency in order to stop power imbalance, imbalance which is generated by the simple fact that one sex can buy and violate another.

Gunilla Ekberg and Kajsa Wahlberg in an article, argues: the conscious awareness regarding the shift in understanding prostitution is also a matter of education. When the law was implemented, police officers, children, educators, etc. were informed and studies show that their program of education and the new norms related to the law, have been well embedded, indeed, studies revealed that male Swedish travellers are less likely to buy women abroad (2011). According to them, men will stop their buying behaviour when “the risk of detection and prosecution will increase” (ibid.). Based on their direct experience, they know that criminalizing the buyer of sexual exploitation is “an effective step toward the goal of abolishing prostitution and trafficking in human beings” (ibid.). they also affirm that the law which criminalize the purchase of sex is “an important tool in changing prevailing cultural patriarchal norms—in moving from a culture that normalizes prostitution as benign and that does not question the harm committed by sex buyers, pimps, and traffickers, to a culture where no one is for sale and where the political, legal, social, and economic rights of women and girls are respected, advanced, and upheld” (Ekberg & Wahlberg 2011).

The same as in Iceland, the critques are made on the following and on a better implementation of the law; it seems that the decrease of women in prostitution was high when the law was launched, nowadays, with the expansion of prostitution via internet, data is difficult to analyse.

I had highlighted the practices Stígamót applied for helping survivors of prostitution, for both development agencies and grass-roots organizations. It may also bring track for collaborator
institutions such as mental health professionals, shelters, hospitals, which are frequently in contact with people in prostitution. Indeed, health care centres should offer a comprehensive therapeutic approach for connection with empowerment and other organisations such as counselling centres. I have been trying to explain and illustrate the empowerment approach used by feminist-abolitionist-organisations when working with survivors of prostitution and any other form of sexual abuse but also clarify the impact of a feminist-abolitionist-organization working on survivors’ empowerment towards a gender-equal society. Therefore, such organisations may gain mainstream public confidence and might be given more space in political environment.

Empowerment as a feminist methodology supports and empowers survivors of sexual abuses including prostitution hence increases the quality of life through the empowerment process. Considering the method is known and has already been researched and analyzed by some people, albeit only a few, I found a lack of previous research available to me which detailed the link to politics and towards a change in construction of society. Indeed, the researches achieved by Sara Helmersson and Håkan Jönson (2013) and Sarah E. Ullman & Stephanie M. Townsend (2008) have shown significant similarities to the Stígamót methodology but a desire to be radical and change the social normativities was missing in the analysis. This is the reason why my research was aiming to investigate how Stígamót uses survivors’ empowerment linked to a radical process for political change.

Even if other feminist organizations work along the same entanglement of the three intersecting core aspects which are Empowerment/Survivors/political change, I would like this research to be of value to women and men, social workers and organizations since this form of work and discourse are not mainstreamed yet.

As shown, notably by Holmström and Skilbrei (2008: 32), legislation is needed to provoke a radical change. With the backing of legislation and prohibition, people will start thinking differently; education will reinforce the changes in power structures, transgress normativities and will tend toward the abolition of power differences. The consequence of a kind of feminist radical change will have great impact on welfare regime and move closer to the ‘societal dream’ Stígamót and many other have in mind.
Appendix

Annex 1.1, questionnaire for survivors

Questionnaire for the interviews at Christina house

1. Can you tell me about your background?
   What are you doing at the moment?
   A. Survivors
   B. Volunteers

A.2. Can you qualify yourself as a survivor? if yes, why?

A.3. How and When have you heard about Stígamót?

A.4. What do you think about the services provided by Stígamót?

A.5. How useful are the services provided by Kristina house?

A.6. According to you, what should be improved?

A.7. Has your social environment changed since you arrived at Kristina House? (Regarding your relatives, friends, etc.)

A.8. What do you think about the law here in Iceland that prohibits buying sex? Do you agree with this prohibition?

A.9. Accordingly, how would you improve the law system?

A.10. Do you know something about what Stígamót is doing with politics? (Advocacy)

A.11. How do you see your future?

Is there something else that you would like to add?

B.2. Why did you get involve with Stígamót and at Kristina House?

B.3. How does the work impact on you?

B.4. Has your social environment changed since you start working as a volunteer there?

B.5. What do you think about the services provided by Stígamót and Kristina House?

B.6. According to you, what should be improved?
B.7. What do you think about the law here in Iceland that prohibits buying sex? Do you agree with this prohibition?

B.8. How would you improve the law system?

B.9. Do you know something about what Stígamót is doing with politics? (Advocacy)

B.10. How do you see your future?

Is there something else that you would like to add?

Annex 1.2, questionnaire for the social worker

// Personal:

1. Can you speak briefly about your background related to your actual place at Stígamót / Kristina House?

2. What are your position / role there? How long have you been working at that position?

3. When & How have you heard about Stígamót?

4. What are the strengths of Stígamót?

// Counselling:

1. Through the counselling are you in contact with women who have been, or still are in contact with prostitution? And THB? If yes, can you give me a proportion?

2. How does prostitution affect Body/soul/mind and social welfare of the person?

3. What is essential to empower those women who have been in contact with prostitution? And THB?

4. Can you tell me more about the perpetrators?

// law:

1. According to your experience and position, what do you think about the law? Any improvement?

2. Why the struggle for abolition is is essential?

3. What are your direct collaborators? What is essential to make the authorities understand? Influence them to take action?

4. What can you say about the victimization of survivors? How do you work on that? + // mainstream public?
// Kristina House:

1. What do you think about Kristina house? And its usefulness?

2. What do you think about the Swan group?
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**Abstract**

This dissertation is an attempt to illustrate the role of a feminist and abolitionist organization towards the enhancement of women’s social conditions and their representation in society. The study is based on my three months training at an Icelandic organization, Stígamót, which is an “Education and Counselling Centre for Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Violence”. My stay there included interviewing social workers and survivors of prostitution and sexual trafficking. The centre has a multi-faceted approach, using feminist empowerment as a methodological process for the purpose of increasing quality of life. Together with feminist theories on intersectionality and empowerment as methodological tools, I am researching the relations between survivors’ empowerment, their agency, with a radical political change, leading to gender-equal society.
Keywords

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