

# PROJECT PORTRAIT

Assessing an exit strategy for prostituted women  
#6b (2011)

## What is this project about?

This is a psychological study that looked at the exiting strategies of prostituted women using an interpretative phenomenological approach. It aimed to provide feedback for Embrace Dignity, a Cape Town-based NGO, on how effective their model was in providing an exit from sex work for prostituted women.

## The research

The study focused on finding ways to improve the interventions currently used to support women wanting to exit sex work. The research looked at previous studies that discussed effective intervention and what the successful models had in common. The focus of this study is to improve the quality of exit interventions used by Embrace

Dignity, whose aim it is to provide the necessary support to exit prostitution successfully.

## What did the researcher do?

Embrace Dignity, as part of their strategy, formed social support and empowerment self-help groups for prostituted women. From two of these groups, the researcher drew a sample of eight women and conducted semi-structured interviews with them. This method allowed the researcher to structure each interview according to the women's subjective experiences of the Embrace Dignity services. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and then analysed using a psychological approach called the interpretative phenomenological approach.



## What you need to know :

A myth about prostitution is that women choose to sell sex for a living. However, this is damaging as it disguises how deeply oppressive prostitution is for those involved in it.

A study conducted across nine countries, including South Africa, found that 89% of women wanted to exit prostitution, but could not because they did not have other means to survive.

## The research findings

The analysis of the interviews showed three broad themes linked to the prostituted women's experiences of Embrace Dignity. These are as follows:

- Emotional support – women described that sharing within the self-help groups was freeing. The acceptance they got in these groups relieved some of the effects of stigma.
- Social support – the groups provided much needed steadiness in the hectic lives of the women. Outcast by society, the groups served to give the women a sense of belonging to a community.
- Physical support – Embrace Dignity provided the women with help in practical areas of the women's lives. These were in the form of small amounts of money to buy food and the sharing of skills (such as sewing or cooking). In this area the researcher found that women wanted more help in finding jobs as a

means to satisfy their basic survival needs.

Findings found that Embrace Dignity provided the women with emotional, social, and physical support. The women were satisfied with the amount of emotional and social support, but felt that there was an urgent need for support in finding employment. The lack of education and skills gave the women a disadvantage in this area.

## Using the research

This information provides Embrace Dignity with feedback about their intervention model. It also adds to the body of knowledge regarding the challenges of exiting prostitution in South Africa.

Future research should explore the introduction of job-related training and job placement programmes in exit interventions.

The study was completed in **Nov. 2011**.

## Want to know more?

Research was carried out by Tessa Heiberg at the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town. This summary is based on her thesis titled "Exploring Prostituted Women's Experiences of a South African Exit Intervention: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis". The project was supervised by Dr Despina Learmonth. The thesis will be available on the Co-op website.

**Keywords:** sex work; prostitution; exit intervention; social support; emotional support; physical support; intervention model

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