

**“I can’t carry on like this”:
A feminist perspective on the process of exiting sex work in a
South African context**

Summary report for Embrace Dignity

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Introduction

Two dominant lines of research are distinguishable in present literature on exiting. The first line of research centers on the process of exit using models of behavior change, whilst the second focuses mainly on the barriers and challenges experienced by individuals in exiting. This research was mainly conducted in the United States and Canada. No research has been done on the process of exiting sex work in South Africa; nor their needs once they have exited, particularly in the context of low socio-economic status (SES) areas. Leaving sex work is not a spontaneous event, but a process (Dalla, 2006). Furthermore, the importance of structural and societal factors influencing the exiting process means that strategies employed must be specific to the population and cannot be generalized to all populations (Dalla, 2006).

In order to fully understand the nature of the exit process, an integrated model and a myriad of barriers that have been established as significantly hindering efforts to exit, must be considered.

An Integrated Model for the Process of Exit

The integrated model by Baker, Dalla and Williamson (2010) has been chosen as useful framework for understanding the process of exiting sex work as it encapsulates both models of behaviour change (e.g. Fuchs Ebaugh, 1988; Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992) as well as models specific to the process of exiting (e.g. Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Sanders, 2007). The integrated model includes five stages: immersion, awareness, deliberate planning, initial exit, re-entry/successful exit. This model highlights the cyclical nature of the process of exit and the multiple attempts required for women to permanently exit sex work.

Barriers to Exiting Sex Work

Individual Factors

Research among women in the process of exiting sex work has illustrated that psychological trauma and other mental health issues (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, bipolar disorder) are very common among those who have not been successful in exiting (Dalla, 2006; Dalla, Xia, & Kennedy, 2003; Farley et al., 2004; Rabinovitch, 2004)

Structural Factors

Economic necessity is one of the most widely cited structural barriers to leaving the sex work industry (Benoit & Millar, 2001; Brown et al., 2006; Gould, 2008; Manopaiboon et al., 2003). Different studies reveal differing particularities in how economic factors are experienced as preventing exit. Common themes often center on the difficulty of finding alternative employment that provides equivalent financial gain, is further compounded by practical issues, such as lack of experience (Benoit & Millar, 2001; Brown et al. 2006; Gould, 2008; Manopaiboon et al., 2003).

Relational and Societal Factors

Positive informal support from family has been identified as one of the most important factors in facilitating exit (Hedin & Månsson, 2004). Although the lack of social support is an important consideration, sex workers often experience a more general level of complete alienation from society as a whole (Brown et al., 2006).

A South African Perspective: Exit in a Context of Violence and Deprivation

South African women in the sex work industry are subject to what is in many ways a unique context. The South African population is at high risk for trauma (Williams, Williams, Stein, Seedat, Jackson & Moomal, 2007), with 94% of a sample of urban Xhosa individuals reporting at least one traumatic life event, and a mean of 3.8 traumatic life events per person (Carey, Stein, Zungu-Dirwayi & Seedat, 2003). The context of multiple trauma (e.g. rape, assault and other violent crimes) is compounded by a culture of violence against women (Coombe, 2002), in which rape has become normalized through the prevalence of rape myths (Cotton, Farley & Baron, 2002) e.g. sex workers cannot be raped (Gould, 2008).

Findings

The individual themes identified in the focus group interviews highlights how the lack of power and agency form an overarching theme in the women's lives. The women are completely disempowered and disenfranchised by the gender oppression, which permeates all aspects of their lives. This is evidenced by the gendered nature of the main barriers to exit that were identified in the analysis – namely, past trauma, motherhood, partnerships, social support, economic necessity, employment and gossip.

This is evidence for the argument made by Mohanty (2003) concerning the significance of gender as the most important form of oppression, especially in the global south. Notably, although the women experience other oppressions such as those of class and race, gender oppression seems to permeate all aspects of their existence, and has been crucial in leading to their initial entry into sex work, as well subsequent instances of re-entry. Therefore it seems that process of exit from sex work in a township context in South Africa, cannot be understood independently of the highly patriarchal nature of the society. The process of exit in South African townships is thus different from the process of exit in developed Western countries, not because of the impact of high levels of trauma, but because of the extremely disempowered and marginalized nature of these women's position in South African society.

Recommendations

Research on sex work conducted in developed Western countries which explores the individual, relational, social and structural factors in isolation from the consideration of the importance of patriarchal values in society, is insufficient in the South African context. The excessive focus in extant literature on models and barriers to exiting sex work, necessarily assumes that women have the power to exit sex work. As is evidenced by this research, this approach is inappropriate in the South African context, as it does not take into account the substantial obstacles faced by women in institutionalized gender oppression. The women in this study repeatedly expressed their desire to exit sex work, and yet were unable to do so. This is evidence that in the context of patriarchal society, these women do not hold the power required to exit, despite their concerted efforts to do so. Moreover, the assumption that women have the power to exit sex work is based on the underlying perception of entry into sex work as free choice. The results of this research clearly illustrate that entry into sex work was not a function of choice, as choosing the lesser of two evils is no choice at all.

Not only does this kind of approach fail to produce a sufficient understanding of the process of exit in low SES contexts, but by assuming that women have the power to exit sex work, it risks disintegrating into a pattern of victim blaming. The message given to the women is that they should be able to exit, and that the fault for their failure to do so lies within them. Such victim blaming leaves the women even more disempowered, and further reinforces their entrapment in sex work.

Moreover, the current intervention in which the women are involved also has the potential to further disempower them. By focusing on micro-level issues such as identity, conflict and communication, the intervention implicitly assumes that the most significant obstacle facing the women is their lack of identity and self-management. The above discussion of themes from the focus group interviews illustrates however, that the most significant barrier to exiting is the institutionalized gender oppression and the consequent lack of power to which the women are subjected. This disempowerment pervades all aspects of the women's existence, and sex work becomes the only viable way for them to regain some modicum of economic independence, autonomy and dignity.

This gender oppression can take many forms and pervades all domains of the women's lives. Moreover, it leaves the women devoid of the power to make choices concerning their professions freely. The extent to which women are trapped in sex work, as a result of contextual pressures, should be acknowledged. Therefore, future research and interventions for facilitating exit from sex work should focus on efforts at consciousness-raising and education of women on gender oppression and the wider societal forces that influence their lives. This would avoid the victim-blaming inherent to approaches that focus on the individual and her choices and identity (Norsworthy & Kuankaew, 2008). Such approaches make the implicit assumption that women involved in prostitution have chosen out of free will to do so. What logically follows from this assumption is the belief that they also hold the power to exit prostitution. This research shows that in the context of a South African township, this assumption is false. Moreover, holding on to this false assumption, impedes any attempts at facilitating exit by ignoring the nature of prostitution as abuse and as the result of the widely accepted institutionalized gender oppression in our society.

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