

#### What is this project about?

This is a feminist study that looked at prostituted women and the challenges they face when trying to leave prostitution. Considering the high prevalence of gender based violence in South Africa, the researchers wanted to understand;

- the experiences of women involved in the sex work industry
- barriers to exiting sex work
- the process of exiting sex work

#### The research

The research focused on black women with a low socio-economic status. The research participants

were part of a self-help group preparing them to leave prostitution. This process, developed by Embrace Dignity, aims to empower women through sharing and teaching them ways to increase self-worth and develop a sense of identity.

#### What did the researchers do?

The researchers used snowball sampling to find 18 female sex workers who had already begun the process of exiting at some point in their lives. They used focus groups, having discussions with the women which were recorded, then transcribed and analyzed. They also examined views of Embrace Dignity’s on prostituted women and the barriers that they continue to face in attempting to permanently leave the world of sex work.



#### What you need to know:

A general misunderstanding within prostitution is that women ‘choose’ to sell sex for a living; and therefore they can choose to leave. However, exiting prostitution is a long, difficult process due to societal, psychological and economic reasons.

Terminology matters when addressing this topic – and not all who work in this area agree on what is best. Do we talk of sex work or of prostitution; of prostituted women or of sex workers?

## The research findings

Most of these women turned to prostitution as a way to survive and were desperate to leave. All of the women agreed that finding a job in order to support themselves and their children would help them to exit prostitution.

The study found that individual, structural and societal factors made it difficult for women to exit prostitution.

- Lack of money was one of the main reasons mentioned for being unable to exit. The participants often found it difficult to find other forms of employment that paid as much as prostitution, especially since they lacked skills required for other work.
- Psychological trauma and mental health issues were common among the women (e.g. post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, bipolar disorder).
- The lack of social support is an important concern, and sex workers often experience a feeling being left out of society as a whole.
- Positive informal support from family was

seen as one of the important factors in helping women exit.

- The women experienced Embrace Dignity as emotionally, socially and physically supportive. However, they stated that their need for employment was not being met.

The study concluded that caring and non-judgmental support is important for exiting. Effective plans of action should try to understand the difficulties of selling sex to survive and acknowledge sex workers as an at risk group, who are often excluded from society.

## Using the research

Policy makers and researchers may use this research to develop policy to regulate work in the sex industry. Policies that offer some form of protection to sex workers may reduce their vulnerability to abuse and frequency of gender-based violence.

Future research and interventions for facilitating exit from prostitution should focus on women's awareness and education on gender oppression and the societal forces that influence their lives. This would avoid the victim-blaming frequently found in approaches that focus on the individual and her choices and identity.

## Want to know more?

Research was carried out by Suvi Hakala & Marike Keller at the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town. This summary is based on their Honour's thesis "I can't carry on like this": A feminist perspective on the process of exiting sex work in a South African context.' The project was supervised by Dr Despina Learmonth and co-supervised by Dr Floretta Boonzaier. The thesis will be available on the Co-op website.

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

**Keywords:** Sex work; challenges; exiting; gender oppression; feminist theory

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