



## **Life Histories of Women who engaged in Sex Work Summary report based on the Dissertation**

**BY MUSUSUMELI SUZAN RAMUDZULI**

DEPARTMENT OF GENDER STUDIES  
Supervisor: Dr Adelene Africa

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**UCT KNOWLEDGE CO-OP**

The UCT Knowledge Co-op facilitated this collaborative project  
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See <http://www.knowledgeco-op.uct.ac.za> or  
Contact us at [barbara.schmid@uct.ac.za](mailto:barbara.schmid@uct.ac.za) / 021 – 650 4415

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## **Introduction**

There have been debates on whether sex work is a choice or coercion; with some scholars arguing sex work is a choice and others arguing that there are other factors that motivate women into sex work. This research involved a study on the life histories of women who engage with sex work, as a way to explore experiences of sex workers. The reason I was interested in conducting this study is because the society stigmatizes sex workers based on what they do without an understanding of the social or economic factors that play a role in encouraging women to enter sex work, or why they continue working as sex workers. This research aims to bring a broader understanding of experiences of sex workers and why and how they engage with sex work; especially considering the South African apartheid history which pushed many women into poverty.

## **What is this project about?**

This is a feminist study that investigated the life histories of women who once engaged in sex work. The study explored the experiences of women who engage in sex work, aiming to understand their experiences from childhood until where they are at the moment. Through exploration of life stories of these women, the study aimed to determine:

- Sex workers childhood and teenage experiences
- Reasons women enter into sex work
- Women experiences as sex workers
- Reasons they exit sex work

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research was used in this study to make sense of sex worker's feelings, experiences, and their social situation as they occurred in their real world. The aim was to determine the reasons these women became sex workers. The study used Life history

interviews to get an overall picture of the participant's life by allowing them to tell their life story in a chronological order.

The study sample consisted of five former street-based female sex workers over the age of 21. All of them were part of an organization called Embrace Dignity that helps sex workers exit sex work. They aim to address prostitution by offering support systems for women who want to exit prostitution, by creating awareness about the economic and social conditions of women and girls, through proposing law reforms and community advocacy programs.

## **The research findings**

The study explored these women's life experiences from childhood to the present. After the data was collected, a thematic analysis identified the following four themes:

### **1. Childhood Experiences**

- When participants were asked to describe their childhood, they reported that they were born in poor families and experienced poverty throughout their childhood.

*"the time I'm [I was] growing up euuuww [sighs]...too much suffering. [.....]. one house [we lived in], and then we got [we were] six because the sisters of my mom were there [living with us]. Even the time I'm young, I grow up I didn't go to school to fix my house because I grow up my family is very poor family. [...]. I grow up, I need to go to school.... and then the day after Christmas, -ama-[the] social workers come to help poor family. [.....]. eishh [sighs], the time I grow up I think the stress is the start [-ed]. To grow up and see my family they are poor, sometimes it takes 2 days without food in the family."*

- It was also found from the study that participants experienced neglect by their fathers. Most of them reported that they grew up without their fathers present in their lives.
- This study also found that women who once engaged in sex work had experienced sexual abuse during their childhood, where participants reported getting raped when they were still young. They also reported physical and emotional abuse during

childhood, where they felt like they did not have enough love and support from their parents or guardians.

*“[when] I was 14 or 15 I got raped by someone that used to visit in my neighbour.[....]. when I escort my friend I met this guy, he asked me that can I escort him he will buy me a pack of chips, I say okay and said bye to my friend.[....] so when we go, near by the shop he said no we are going to this house near by the shop. I said okay. I go with him and he was talking to his friend outside, the owner of that house. They were busy talking, talking, talking...I was feeling the fear but I did not want....I was busy saying the devil is the liar nothing will happen to me. So this guy came back alone with not the owner of the house. He locked the door when I asked ‘what is happening, what are you doing?’, he started to come to me and hit and take off my clothes. He raped me. So, I was full of blood. [Crying]”*

- The study also found that sex workers usually experience sexual relations during an early age. Participants had their first boyfriends at the age between 15 and 17, fell pregnant during their teenage years, and some had miscarriages as teenagers.
- Sex workers had experienced education obstacles during their childhood. Even though some studies informing the literature review found that low education levels was one of the reasons women entered sex work, none of them explained the significance of educational obstacles on these women’s life. *This study found that women faced educational difficulties as teenagers, and most of the participants dropped out of school while doing grade 9/10.*

*“I dropped at school in 2008 in grade 9. Yes. uhhmmm, after dropping out I went to stay with my boyfriend. Then we broke up with my boyfriend and I didn't go straight at home. I went to my other friend's place and I stayed there with her parents. Then we would go out and drink.”*

## **2. Reasons for Entering Sex Work**

- The study found that factors such as poverty, unemployment, abandonment by parents and peer influence encouraged women to enter into sex work. As in other

literature, this study also found that the respondents entered sex work because they needed money. Other factors such as educational obstacles, abandonment from parents, and limited job opportunities further encouraged them in this decision.

*“So I was working on the weekends, so during the week I was always sleeping or taking my CVs somewhere. So I found out that my cousins, I heard some igossip from icommunity that my cousins were sex workers.” [.....]. “They had money that I work for 3 days but every day they came back with that money hei, I started to get stressed.” [.....]. “So I started to ask my sister that do you mind if I can go with you for just 3 days”*

- Furthermore, it was found that sex workers had been introduced to sex work by a lady friend, a family member or a colleague. This shows that sex workers are most likely to be introduced to sex work by someone they know.

### **3. Experiences as Sex Workers**

- Though women were motivated by their socio-economic situations to enter sex work, it was found that after entering this kind of work, women felt that it gave them more freedom, more autonomy, and provided them with more money. This study also found that sex work offered women financial stability, and it allowed them to work flexible hours.

*“In terms of the money, it was good because I had the money anytime I wanted. When it is hot I know that you can have the money, when it's raining you know that the clients will call you. It's either you go to their place or you tell them where you are going to meet, maybe at a B&B, or sometimes at your place. Maybe you know some of the clients you know they are honest and they have a lot of money so you end up showing them where you are staying.”*

- Furthermore, even though participants reported that the job offered them stability and flexibility, they also reported that it was stigmatised and therefore they suffered discrimination from society. Because sex work is considered as immoral and unacceptable, it was found that sex workers felt the need to hide their work from their families and partners, and that they found it hard to do so. Women in the study

reported that they would lie to their families and partners about what they were doing.

- This study also found that sex workers had experienced violence with all of them having been raped by their clients, robbed by skollies (thieves), and endured violence from the police. They had been raped and stabbed by clients, clients refused to pay them, and some clients refused to use a condom.

*“Sometimes they break the condom, sometimes while they still busy they will open the knife and want to stab you, and want to take the money. A lot of things happen” [...]. “Someone come from the street and say let’s go in, when you say the money they say I will give when we finish. Then you just do and they say I don’t have money. So you find different people and different behaviour.”*

- As much as participants reported that sex work granted them stability and flexibility, they also reported that it was dangerous working on the road and they used drugs to cope with this.

#### **4. Reasons for Leaving Sex Work**

- The women interviewed in the study were involved with Embrace Dignity, which offers them counselling, training (e.g. Computer skills) and the opportunity to run workshops in their communities informing people about the dangers of sex work. The study found that the sex workers who exited sex work through Embrace Dignity, did so because of economic reasons and opportunities to further their education.
- Other participants reported that money ‘on the road’ had become less as they had fewer clients. This shows that as much as these women entered sex work for financial reasons, they also left due to financial reasons as Embrace Dignity was giving them opportunities to support themselves.
- Therefore, one can argue that sex workers are motivated into sex work by financial circumstances, and if given other ways to make money, they would exit the industry. Participants also reported that the opportunity to go back to school encouraged them to exit sex work.

*“I never thought of going to school, but when I met Embrace I wanted to go back to school. and with the classes that I took there...like, I couldn't start a computer but today I have an email address, I go online to check emails. I know how to answer a cell phone properly. I once was a chef in a Chinese restaurant, I was a chef there working in food industry. Embrace took me to training for cooking for like 6 months. So I am from Joburg with that skill of cooking. Yes. I am doing everything, classess. I can handle my anger when someone comes to me with a cold feet. I know how to handle a person. I can communicate. I'm a better English speaker. I am good in writing. Yes.”*

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Based on the results from the study, I argue that there are structural forces that motivate women to engage with sex work. During childhood, most sex workers experience living in poverty, facing educational obstacles, experiencing violence, and engaging in sexual relations while still young; these factors later played a role in encouraging women to take on sex work. The study also found that all participants had attended high schools where teachers and students had a negative attitude towards school, which encouraged them to drop out of school. Some of the respondents tried looking for decent jobs but they could not get any. Therefore, I argue that these are structural factors that encourage women to enter sex work that need to be acknowledged instead of stigmatizing sex work. This is especially relevant in the South African context where apartheid created structural forces that limited opportunities for people within a lower economic class.

I further argue that criminalization of sex work in South Africa only furthers the marginalization and stigmatization of sex work. As found in the study, sex workers are stigmatized by society and experience violence from clients, police, gangs and other ladies they work with on the road. Criminalization of sex work encourages such violence towards sex workers as there is no policy to protect them from the clients or any others. Instead of criminalizing sex work, the state should work with sex work organizations in order to help women who like to exit by offering them training that could enhance their skills and thus their chances of having a stable job.

It is also important to note that not all sex workers want to exit sex work, as found in a study by Gould and Fick (2009) according to which sex workers reported that they had worked in different places before but felt that they earned more in sex work.

I argue that the state should acknowledge structural forces that encourage sex workers to enter into sex work before criminalizing sex work. It should develop ways to help women who would like to exit, but also develop policies for those who prefer sex work to other jobs.

## **Using the Research**

This project highlights the need for further research in this area of study in South Africa, especially in terms of understanding in-depth experiences of sex workers. Most studies on sex work in South Africa are quantitative and only highlight sex work related statistics.

This study used life history interviews with the aim to fill the gap in the literature in this study area. It also highlighted the different factors that encourage women to engage in sex work, and the power dynamics that plays a role within their day to day experiences.

Structural forces should be considered and acknowledged by the policy makers instead of criminalising sex work without understanding the experiences of sex work and the reasons women engage in sex work.



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The complete dissertation from which this report is drawn will be shared at <http://www.knowledgeco-op.uct.ac.za/kco/proj/completed> under project #158.