

**Exploring Prostituted Women's Experiences
of a South African Exit Intervention:
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Summary report for Embrace Dignity

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A popular misconception about prostitution centres on the belief that prostituted women 'choose' to sell sex for a living (Smith & Marshall, 2007). This myth is damaging as it serves to conceal the deeply oppressive nature of prostitution. In terms of push factors into prostitution, research points to a strong link between prostitution and poverty (Hardman, 1997; Dalla, 2002; Brown, Higgitt, Miller, Wingert, Williams & Morrisette, 2006). In a study conducted across 9 countries, including South Africa, it was found that 89% of the participants wanted to exit prostitution but could not because they did not have the means to survive (Farley, Cotton, Lynne, Zumbeck, Spiwak, Reyes, Alvarez & Sezgin, 2003). An international study by Dalla (2002) showed that 44% of the participants turned to prostitution out of economic desperation. Similarly, a study conducted with prostituted women in Cape Town found that the majority of women sold sex as a way to make ends meet (Gould & Fick, 2008). Such research suggests that poverty forces women into prostitution as a means of survival.

Prostitution is Harmful

Prostitution is physically, socially and psychologically harmful. Prostituted women are at risk for violent attacks, assault, robbery or rape by their clients. In addition, prostitution is highly stigmatized and prostituted women are outcast by society (Dalla, 2002; Brown et al., 2006; Hotaling, Brun-is, Johnson, Bird & Melbye, 2004). These women are also vulnerable to a variety of mental health problems such as anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse disorders, dissociation, depression and other mood disorders (Farley, 2004). In light of the abovementioned dangers of prostitution, it is understandable that many women wish to exit.

Dynamics of Exiting

Exiting prostitution is a long and difficult process (Baker, Dalla & Williamson, 2010). The pathway out of prostitution is not linear, but in most cases involves multiple entry and exit points. Different schools of thought exist regarding the factors that influence exit. Mansson and Hedin (1999) propose that the key to a successful exit depends on the woman's internal commitment to the process. Sanders (2007) opposes this view and argues that political, structural, cultural and legal factors play a vital role in determining the success of the exit.

Existing Interventions

The extant literature on exit interventions for prostituted women is largely internationally based. Two international exit models yielding successful results suggested the required characteristics of a good exit intervention strategy. The first model, SAGE (Standing Against Global Exploitation) is a peer education group (Hotaling et al., 2004). The programme provides mental health services, vocational training, job placement, transitional housing and counselling to prostituted women. SAGE follows a non-judgemental approach that does not discriminate against participants if they return to prostitution. The programme recognises the complexity of exiting as a process.

The second model, developed by Hardman (1997) takes the form of an on-going social support group for prostituted women with children. The aim of the group was to assist prostituted women to exit by empowering them to take control of their lives and by providing them with alternatives to prostitution. Women requested information and advice in the areas of housing, health care, education, money and parenting skills. They also acknowledged a need for emotional support.

An exploration of the above two models showed that caring and non-judgemental support is crucial in assisting prostituted women to exit. Effective intervention strategies

attempt to understand the difficulties inherent in selling sex to survive (Weiner, 1996). They acknowledge the vulnerabilities of these women as a marginalized group. A programme that tailors its intervention to suit the needs of the participants will prove the most successful (Hotaling et al., 2004). An effective intervention will also consider the political, social and economic contexts within which the participants operate.

Whilst much research has been conducted on international exit interventions, there is a dearth of research available on exit interventions for prostituted women in South Africa.

Findings

An analysis of the interviews of eight prostituted women's experiences of a Cape Town based exit intervention, Embrace Dignity, yielded three broad themes. The first theme highlighted the prostituted women's experience of Embrace Dignity as emotionally supportive. Many of the women described the process of sharing within the self-help groups as freeing. The acceptance they receive from the groups helps to ease the psychological effects of stigma.

The second theme explored the women's experience of Embrace Dignity as a source of social support. The groups provide much needed consistency in the otherwise chaotic lives of the women. The women learn that they can trust Embrace Dignity to provide them with support. The groups also provide the women, who are outcast by society, with a sense of belonging to a community.

The third theme relates to the women's experience of Embrace Dignity as physically supportive. The intervention provides them with practical help in some areas, such as providing them with a small amount of money weekly to buy food. They also benefit from the sharing of skills, such as sewing or cooking. The women identified opportunities for employment as an area of help they find lacking within Embrace Dignity. Almost all of the women expressed an urgent need for Embrace Dignity to provide them with employment as a means to satisfy their basic survival needs.

Therefore, findings revealed that the women experience Embrace Dignity as emotionally, socially and physically supportive. They expressed satisfaction with the emotional and social support that they receive from the intervention. However, whilst they feel that Embrace Dignity offers sufficient physical support in some areas, they claim that their need for employment is not being met. The women identified employment as an urgent need. The majority of these women turned to prostitution as a means of survival and they are desperate to exit. All of the women agreed that finding a job would enable them to exit prostitution. Unfortunately, due to their lack of education and skills, they are at a disadvantage in this regard.

Future Research

In response to the participants' expressed need for employment, future research should explore the introduction of a vocational training and job placement programme to South African based exit interventions for prostituted women.

The current research targeted women within the intervention at a specific point in time, which allowed an effective exploration of their experiences of the intervention, however did not provide feedback on whether or not the intervention is successful in assisting women to exit prostitution. Future research should therefore target women at different stages of participation in the intervention; to track the effects that the intervention programme has on their attempt to exit prostitution.

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