

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

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### **Abstract**

Prostitution is the oldest form of oppression. Many prostituted women in South Africa wish to exit sex work, but are unable to because they have no other means of earning money. There is a dearth of research available on assisting prostituted women to exit sex work in South Africa. This study explored the effectiveness of a Cape Town-based NGO's - *Embrace Dignity* - exit intervention for prostituted women. Using semi-structured interviews it investigated the experiences of eight prostituted women in Cape Town. The research goal was to be able to inform improvements to the intervention for exit. An interpretative phenomenological approach was used to analyse interviews of women's experiences of the intervention. Findings revealed that attempting to exit prostitution in South Africa is an incredibly difficult and deeply complex process. An exploration of women's experiences of *Embrace Dignity* suggested that whilst it provides emotional and social support to prostituted women, it does not address their physical needs, most importantly that of employment. This study reveals that although emotional support plays a crucial role in assisting prostituted women to exit, it is secondary to the urgent physical support needed to satisfy the basic survival needs of prostituted women living in extreme poverty in South Africa.

## 1. Introduction

Prostitution is defined as the exchange of sexual acts for money or other valuable possessions (Tomura, 2009; Williamson, 2000). Radical feminist theory argues that prostitution is inherently violent and exploitative of women (Jolin, 1994). Prostituted women are at risk of danger on a physical, social and psychological level (Farley, 2004). In South Africa, studies show that poverty forces women to enter prostitution as a means of survival (Gould & Fick, 2008). Many prostituted women wish to exit but are unable to because of pressing financial needs. Surprisingly, there is a paucity of research available on exit interventions for prostituted women in South Africa.

This study explores Embrace Dignity, a South African exit intervention for prostituted women, through the experiences of eight women in Cape Town. An interpretative phenomenological analysis of interviews with the women elicited valuable information regarding their experiences of the intervention. This information provides Embrace Dignity with constructive feedback regarding their intervention model. It also contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the challenges of exiting prostitution in South Africa.

### **Embrace Dignity**

Embrace Dignity is a non-profit, advocacy organisation created with the aim of influencing law reform around prostitution in South Africa. The organisation adopts the view that prostitution is harmful toward women. They argue that the human rights of these women are overlooked and in some instances violated by government, society and the police. Embrace Dignity is geared toward implementing strategies to assist prostituted women in exiting. As part of this strategy, they have formed weekly social support and empowerment groups for prostituted women. These groups are called Masiphakameni, which means women should 'stand up' in the fight against exploitation by men.

### **Is Prostitution a Choice?**

A damaging misconception exists within society that prostituted women 'choose' to sell sex for a living (Smith & Marshall, 2007). This myth serves to conceal the deeply oppressive and harmful nature of prostitution. Some opponents of prostitution refer to it as sexual slavery, arguing that women are helpless victims within a patriarchal society (Kempadoo, 1999).

In a study conducted by Smith and Marshall (2007) it was found that the majority of prostituted women disliked selling sex. Participants reported feelings of resentment toward their clients. They also disclosed their own feelings of shame and self-loathing due to their involvement in prostitution. Similarly, in a different 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).

The majority of prostituted women in South Africa report histories of abuse, violence, devastation and discrimination. These experiences are compounded by a lack of education, unemployment and extreme poverty. Prostituted women therefore sell sex, as a last resort, in a desperate attempt to satisfy their basic survival needs (Brown, Higgitt, Miller, Wingert, Williams & Morrissette, 2006).

There is a strong link between prostitution and poverty (Hardman, 1997; Dalla, 2002; Brown et al., 2006). In South Africa, the typical demographic of a prostituted woman is a young black female between the ages of 24 and 28, from a disadvantaged background (Gould & Fick, 2008). Gould and Fick (2008) conducted research with prostituted women in Cape Town and found that the majority of women sold sex as a way to make ends meet. An international study by Dalla (2002) yielded similar results. 44 percent of the participants in this study turned to prostitution out of economic desperation.

It is therefore easy to understand how a woman living in extreme poverty, who is unable to satisfy her physical need of hunger, turns to selling sex in order to put food on the table. This woman will sell her body, despite the dangers inherent in prostitution, in order to survive.

### **Harms of Prostitution**

Prostitution is highly stigmatized (Dalla, 2002; Brown et al., 2006; Hotaling, Brun-is, Johnson, Bird & Melbye, 2004). Societal attitudes toward prostitution are mixed, however the majority of society views prostitution as immoral. Prostituted women are subjected to a variety of negative labels such as 'fallen women', 'street walkers' and 'whores'. Such labels reflect society's view of prostituted women as deviant and worthless (Mattu, 2007).

A variety of damaging myths about prostituted women exist in society. Many people mistakenly believe that prostituted women earn a substantial income (Hardman, 1997). A more destructive myth relates to the belief that it is impossible to rape a woman who sells sex for a living (Farley, 2004). This myth centres on the assumption that rape is part of the

prostituted woman's job. An example of societal acceptance of such rape myths can be seen in the case of a Californian judge who overturned a jury's decision to accuse a man of rape. The man was the prostituted woman's client. The judge believed that because the woman sold sex for a living, she did not have the right to refuse it (Arax, 1986). Such misconceptions about prostituted women contribute to their feelings of being judged and stigmatized by society.

People are stigmatized on the basis that they do not fit in with society (Goffman, 1986). They are classed as abnormal and are perceived as possessing socially undesirable characteristics. As a result, society looks down on them. Such people are avoided due to the belief that their imperfection is contagious. Stigmatized people are rejected by society.

Such rejection and stigmatization by society has a profoundly negative effect on the mental well-being of prostituted women. Tomura (2009) conducted an in depth phenomenological analysis of a prostituted woman's experience of stigma. Findings indicated that the woman experienced significant stress because of the stigma associated with her identity as a prostituted woman. Public humiliation over being negatively labelled caused her to hide the fact that she sold sex. This necessitated the adoption of a double life which exacerbated her levels of stress and anxiety. She also experienced anger and frustration over being wrongfully outcast by society (Tomura, 2009).

Prostituted women are mistakenly believed to be tough, as though they are unaffected by their circumstances. This is a false assumption (Hardman, 1997). The majority of prostituted women grow up in a physically or sexually abusive environment, which has an extremely negative effect on their emotional and mental state (Hardman, 1997; Farley, 2004). In a study conducted by Mansson & Hedin (1999) involving 23 prostituted women, 75% reported a difficult childhood.

Prostituted women who are victims of violence and rape experience the same kind of emotional trauma that non prostituted women experience when exposed to such traumatic experiences (Farley, 2004). However, the negative psychological effects that prostituted women experience are not given the same respect and understanding. It is possible that this is linked to the discriminatory belief that because prostituted women 'choose' to sell sex; they are responsible for their own pain and are therefore refused the right to feel badly about it.

Prostituted women are 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). Prostitution is dangerous in many ways; physically,

emotionally and mentally. It is therefore understandable that the majority of prostituted women wish to exit.

## **2. Dynamics of Exiting**

Exiting prostitution is a long and complex process (Baker, Dalla & Williamson, 2010). Various theoretical frameworks exist that facilitate understanding of the process of exiting prostitution. Two frameworks will be discussed here, Breaking the Matthew Effect (Mansson & Hedin, 1999) and the Typology of Transitions (Sanders, 2007).

Breaking the Matthew Effect, developed by Mansson and Hedin (1999), was based on a study conducted with 23 women who had exited prostitution. Findings revealed three routes out of prostitution. Firstly, a prostituted woman may exit in response to an eye opening event. Such an event is not physically harmful, but elicits a strong fear response within the woman, for example discomfort over an unwelcomed invitation to engage in sexual acts. Secondly, a traumatic event such as a physical or violent attack may cause the woman to exit. Lastly, positive life events represent a route out of prostitution. Such events may entail having a baby, falling in love or finding employment.

Mansson and Hedin (1999) also identified various other factors that influence whether or not a woman exits prostitution. Structural factors involve social circumstances that play a role in the woman's life, such as the speed and ease with which she finds a job. Relational factors deal with relationships that the woman has in her life. Close relationships such as those with parents, partners or children have the power to be healing. Negative relationships however can prove to be destructive. Social networks are also an important source of social support that can influence exit. Mansson and Hedin (1999) believe that the most crucial factor influencing exit is an individual factor, the individual's level of internal commitment to the process of exiting.

Sanders (2007) proposes a different framework, the Typology of Transitions. After interviewing 30 prostituted women; 15 of which were street based, and 15 brothel based, Sanders proposed four pathways out of sex work. The reactionary type is a spontaneous response to an important life event, which could be positive or negative. The gradual planning type necessitates an organised thought process in which the woman plans her exit over time. The natural progression type describes a process in which the prostituted woman

reaches the decision to exit naturally. The yo-yo type is marked by a pattern of frequent movement in and out of prostitution, where a woman exits, re-enters and then exits again, and so the pattern continues. Sanders (2007) challenges the idea put forward by Mansson and Hedin (1999) that the key to a successful exit depends on the woman's internal commitment to the process. Instead, Sanders (2007) argues that political, structural, cultural and legal factors play a vital role in determining the success of the exit.

### **Existing Interventions for Prostituted Women**

A review of the literature on existing exit interventions for prostituted women was necessary in order to understand characteristics of a successful intervention programme. Two international examples yielding successful results will be discussed here.

The first model is a peer education group known as SAGE (Standing Against Global Exploitation) (Hotaling et al., 2004). SAGE is a human rights project that is run by survivors of prostitution according to a client-centred approach. It therefore deals with issues that are identified by the participants. The programme provides mental health services, vocational training, job placement, transitional housing and counselling. 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. It does not enforce abstinence, which would be unrealistic for people with little or no resources. In other words, women don't have to abstain from prostitution in order to participate in the programme.

The SAGE programme consists of three stages. The crisis intervention and stabilization stage addresses basic survival needs and provides necessary medical care, accommodation and food. The integration/skills-building/education stage provides participants with emotional and social tools needed to reintegrate into society. The final stage provides vocational training and job placement for the participants.

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 assistance in terms of information and advice in the areas of housing, health care, education, money and parenting skills. They also acknowledged a need for emotional support. The groups were structured according to a 10 week programme. The results of the programme did not meet Hardman's (1997) initial aim, which was to empower women to exit prostitution. The majority of women who



attended the programme remained in prostitution. However, the programme resulted in the creation of doubt within the women about their continued involvement in prostitution; they began to seriously consider exiting.

From the two programmes presented above, it is evident that caring and non-judgemental support is crucial in assisting prostituted women to exit and showing them how to live independently. Information on the above exit programmes can be used as a framework within which to address the topic of exit interventions in South Africa. Whilst much research has been conducted on international exit interventions, there is a paucity of research available on exit interventions for prostituted women in South Africa.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is concerned with the meaning that people assign to their experiences of social phenomena (Jones, 1995; Holloway, 1997). It recognises that people view the world from different vantage points and is concerned with understanding the meaning from the vantage point of the participant. This is known as an emic perspective and requires empathetic understanding. This type of research seeks specifically to understand how meaning is constructed for each individual. It is therefore not concerned with preconceived variables or proving certain hypotheses, as this would imply the imposition of the researcher's frame of reference on to the participant (Willig, 2001). A qualitative design suits this study as the research is purely exploratory in nature and focuses on attempting to understand the prostituted women's subjective experience of the Embrace Dignity intervention model.

Qualitative interviewing follows an empathic approach (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This was useful in this study as it encouraged open dialogue during the interview process. Furthermore, qualitative research challenges the concept of the interviewer as the expert, which was important to this study as prostituted women are accustomed to being oppressed, stigmatized and viewed as inferior. It was therefore important to create a sense of equality within the interview space in order to encourage mutual creation of knowledge.

## **Validity**

Validity is defined as the extent to which our research explains what we intend it to explain (Willig, 2008). Through the use of qualitative methods in this study, I ensured validity in the following ways: firstly, I allowed the women to actively challenge my assumptions about meanings. This invited dialogue and the co-creation of knowledge. Secondly, I engaged in reflexivity to ensure the active assessment of my role in the research process, making sure that I did not impose my own frame of reference onto the research (Willig, 2008).

## **Sampling**

A sample of 8 prostituted women was recruited for this study. The sample was drawn from two of the Masiphakameni self-help groups. Specifically, four women were recruited from the Cape Town group and four from the Langa group. No exclusion criteria in terms of age were used. One important criterion was that the women had attempted to exit the sex trade at least once.

## **Data Collection Methods and Procedure**

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews. This provided focus, yet was sufficiently un-structured to allow flexibility within the interview (Willig, 2008). The research question was used as a guide in formulating open ended questions, serving as triggers to encourage participation, yet the participants' responses were key in shaping the structure of the interview. (See Appendix B for the interview guideline.)

This method allowed the interview to be structured in terms of the women's subjective experience of the intervention, but still left room for open, free responses from participants on the topic. A sensitive balance was maintained within the interview process, between guiding the interview to allow for collection of data but also allowing the participant sufficient space to redefine the topic, challenge any questions or assumptions and add new insight (Willig, 2008).

The interview was about understanding meaning created by each participant on the topic, therefore, I attempted to remain neutral and refrain from guiding the participant toward my attitudes or beliefs about sex work or the intervention. The flexibility of this method of data collection proved effective in the meaningful exploration of the world view of the participant, and enabled me to view the participant's experience of the intervention from her own frame of reference.

The interview was tape recorded for research purposes. The data was then listened to, transcribed and analysed according to interpretative phenomenological analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analysed according to interpretative phenomenological analysis. Once the data was collected, I began by reading and attempting to summarize the participants' experiences from their point of view. This is referred to as the descriptive phenomenological stage (Larkin, 2003). I then attempted to make inferences about the meaning underlying the participant's experience. This is referred to as the interpretative stage (Larkin, 2003).

Interpretative phenomenology focuses on how people make sense of important experiences in their lives (Smith et al., 2009). It goes further than descriptive reports of the experience and looks at the underlying meaning and significance that a person attributes to an experience. Following an interpretative phenomenological approach, I assessed the women's subjective experiences of the intervention and looked at the underlying meaning they attribute to their experience of the intervention.

### **Reflexivity**

The researcher plays a key role within the qualitative research process. Reflexivity acknowledges that it is impossible for the researcher to be a 'blank slate' when approaching the research, in other words, to remain completely neutral (Willig, 2008). The self of the researcher is the most important tool during the analysis of data. Therefore, in order to conduct effective qualitative research, it was necessary for me to identify any personal values or biases that may have affected the research process prior to the commencement of the study (Lester, 1999).

Admittedly, before beginning this research project, I was unaware of the extent of the damaging effects that prostitution potentially has on women. Reviewing the literature facilitated a theoretical understanding of such effects; however it did not adequately prepare me for the intense level of pain and suffering that the women brought into the interview. I believe that I took a certain level of ignorance with me into the interview, and it is possible that this had an effect on the interview itself. I felt that I was able to establish good rapport with the women. I was able to draw on my counselling skills training during moments where the women became emotional. However, I was critically aware of the difference in roles between counsellor and researcher.

In this study, I considered my role within the process and what I may have contributed in terms of personal demographic; including age, race, gender and even personality. As a young, white female from a University, the women may have perceived me as 'upper class' or advantaged. This might have influenced the content of what they shared, as well as the manner in which they shared it with me. It is possible that being a female afforded me a certain degree of acceptance from the women.

### **Ethics**

Care was taken to protect the participants and their psychological well-being from harm. Before the interview began, I informed the participants about the aims and details of the research and requested that they sign a consent form in support of this (See Appendix A). No deception occurred as this was exploratory research into the prostituted women's subjective experience of the intervention. I had no preconceived hypotheses to prove and therefore adopted a neutral, inquiring stance to the best of my ability. I ensured that participants felt within their rights to withdraw from the research at any time without fear of being penalized. I also ensured the women that their anonymity would be protected throughout the research process (Willig, 2008).

I facilitated the ethical establishment of rapport between myself and the participant but was careful not to allow the participant to over disclose to the point where she may have felt vulnerable after the interview.

Each prostituted woman received a sum of R50 as a token of appreciation for their participation in the study. I informed the participants that their participation was valued. Most importantly, I approached the interviews with an awareness of the sensitivity of the topic.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee at the University of Cape Town.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

Effective support services for prostituted women strive 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.

An analysis of the interviews of prostituted women's experiences of the particular exit intervention yielded three broad themes. The first theme highlights the prostituted women's experience of the exit intervention as emotionally supportive. Many of the women described the process of sharing within the groups as freeing. The acceptance they receive from the groups helps to ease the psychological effects of stigma. The second theme explores the women's experience of the exit intervention as a source of social support. It is possible that the consistency of weekly groups helps rebuild their faith in society. 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 the intervention as physically supportive. The exit intervention provides them with practical help in some areas. They also benefit from the sharing of skills. Almost all of the women expressed an urgent need for the exit intervention to provide them with employment as a means to satisfy their basic survival needs.

#### **a) Emotional support**

Women described their experience of sharing within the groups as freeing. The acceptance they feel from the groups is a welcomed contrast to the judgement and stigma they are accustomed to receiving from society.

#### **Sharing is freeing.**

Prostitution is oppressive and discriminates against women (Brown, Higgitt, Miller, Wingert & Williams, 2006; Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). Prostituted women face exploitation on two levels. Firstly, they are exploited by society; living in extreme poverty forces them into selling sex as a means of survival (Brown et al., 2006). Secondly, they are exploited by men who take advantage of their economic desperation to force them into performing sexual acts that they are not comfortable with. This double form of exploitation results in the disempowerment and psychological imprisonment of South African prostituted women. The intervention provides women with a safe space to share their feelings, emotions and experiences. This affords them temporary freedom from such emotional restraints.

*I feel very well, since I joined it, we sharing everything, together. We feel free.*

*Yes it helps me because something is coming out. When I'm talking there is something coming out. You know. So I feel very comfortable after that.*

*It's very good because you don't keep that thing in your heart so that you can be sick and what what.*

*..Because I sit with people mos I know and because that people I see there I know that people all of the people because we work together, so and I can, I feel, I can feel free to to..to.. speak with them with my problems.*

The above excerpts highlight the positive influence that sharing has on the emotional state of these women. The majority of the women in this study echoed this sentiment. Support groups offered by the intervention create a safe space where prostituted women who feel imprisoned by their circumstances can go to feel free. These support groups allow women the freedom to tell their story when, where and how they choose, granting them independence and a sense of control over their lives. An effective intervention for prostituted women understands the difficulties that women may experience in sharing their stories and allows women to regain a sense of trust in their own time (Weiner, 1996).

Prostituted women are subjected to violently traumatic and emotionally damaging experiences on a daily basis (Farley, 2004). The result is the development of a negative emotional state (Kramer, 2006). However, the majority of women lack the opportunity to deal with such experiences in an appropriate way (Hardman, 1997). This can have serious negative effects on the woman's psyche. Sharing within a support group provides therapeutic benefits. Whilst all the women reported positive experiences of sharing within the group context, one suggested that the exit intervention should provide a professional counselling service.

*We want a counsellor, we want a counselling, I can act as if I'm strong but deep down I'm not strong, so I need a counselling.*

This statement reflects an underlying level of suffering and suggests that whilst support received from sharing in the group is greatly beneficial to this woman, it is not

sufficient in addressing the depths of her psychological pain. Counselling services are vital in order to assist prostituted women in dealing with traumatic experiences (Brown et al., 2006).

### **Acceptance.**

Selling sex is a controversial topic that is greatly misunderstood and therefore stigmatized. As a result, prostituted women are not accepted by society. The exit intervention provides relief from such stigmatization and accepts women unconditionally.

*They [society] always judge us. For example, if I get raped here, and I tell a person who doesn't do this business. He will think I'm lying. They will ask one question.. a sex worker doesn't get raped. They don't understand we do get raped even though we do this business. So we don't talk to other people, we talk to each other.*

*They [the intervention] feel, hey, too much for us. They want us to exit to get something so that we can eat.*

*I open up and tell them about my experience in the street and they were supportive you see (pause) so from that day, I always come to their meetings because I didn't know there were people who cared for us so I come there and they form a group.*

The above statements reveal the supportive, caring and accepting nature of the exit intervention. Prostituted women are not judged. They are treated with warmth and compassion and are respected as human beings. This is a welcomed contrast to the judgement and stigmatization they receive from society on a daily basis (Dalla, 2002; Brown et al., 2006). Many marginalized or stigmatized women choose not to seek help because they fear being publicly discriminated against (Wilson and Dalton, 2008). It is therefore important for an exit intervention to treat prostituted women in an accepting, compassionate and non-judgemental way, in order to facilitate their recovery (Hotaling et al., 2004).

*I'm very free to talk because I know that they don't undermine me or laugh at me. You just understand each other and give each other advice.*

This woman seems to experience the support group as a safe, accepting space in which she can express herself freely. She implies that she is surrounded by people who relate to what she is going through and can therefore empathise with her problems. Prostitution

evokes intense feelings of shame and stigma. Therefore, prostituted women feel more at ease and able to trust others who have shared similar experiences (Hotaling et al., 2004).

### **b) Social support**

Scheduled weekly meetings provide much needed structure and consistency to the prostituted woman's life. Prostituted women are outcast by society. They therefore turn to each other for support and learn to depend on one another. This creates a sense of belonging to their own community.

#### **Consistency.**

Prostituted women are lied to, manipulated and taken advantage of on a daily basis. The street is a dangerous place where it is not safe to trust anyone. Prostituted women are weary of people, as the result of a long history of emotional, sexual and physical abuse (Hotaling et al., 2004). Even the police, the very people appointed to serve the community, prove unreliable in helping prostituted women. In fact, police often abuse their power to take advantage of these women (Fick, 2006). A prostituted woman's life is therefore characterised by inconsistency and stress. The exit intervention provides the women with a much needed sense of consistency. They provide the women with something to depend on. Groups run weekly, at the same time on the same day each week. Women learn to rely on these groups.

*Cause if you sleep and have stress every fucking day. I'm not working, I sleep fucking every day. But on Friday, I know Masiphakameni is coming.*

This woman expresses an intense level of stress, which she experiences daily. Her way of coping with such stress is to shut off and sleep, a form of escapism. However, her statement suggests that Fridays provide her with relief from her stress and suffering, because Fridays are the days that the weekly support groups are held. This implies that the groups are the highlight of her week, something that she can rely on. This provides someone whose life is characterised by chaos and a lack of control with a sense of security and stability. The level of deprivation that these women face is intense. A small amount of consistency goes a long way in providing them with hope and a temporary sense of relief from their challenging circumstances.



*They do better for us (pause). Because they come every Friday, every Friday, so at least I manage now to look face to face with my brother on my eyes because I know they come on Friday to give us something to buy food so at least its better.*

This woman relies on the money that the exit intervention gives her every Friday to buy food for her family. Her statement reveals a significant level of dependence on the exit intervention. The money that the intervention gives her every Friday allows her one day of freedom per week from the shame and embarrassment she feels over not being able to provide for her family. Such consistent support from the exit intervention helps the women develop the ability to trust others.

### **Sense of community.**

In general, society adopts a moral and discriminatory attitude toward prostitution (Mayhew & Mossman, 2007). In severe cases, it is believed that prostitution is morally contagious. Prostituted women are therefore outcast by society. As a result, they lack the recognition associated with being an active and respected member of a community. In a study involving focus groups with prostituted women, the participants spoke of their desire to feel included in the community (Brown et al., 2006). Rejection by society forces the women to seek comfort and support elsewhere, which they find amongst each other. Prostituted women gain a deep sense of comfort when they are surrounded by their ‘own kind’ in a family like environment (Brown et al., 2006).

*Even if you are stressed, when, when you in the group, you can share your problem because we are sisters so you can share with your sister. I can't share with my neighbour because it's going to be shared to others at the end of the day. So, when we talking in the group we know that here; nobody is going to take that thing outside.*

This excerpt highlights the sense of belonging that this woman feels within the community of prostituted women. She regards the other women as her sisters, her family, indicating a deep sense of togetherness or solidarity. She is able to share things with her new family that she is unable to share with anyone else, which suggests that she trusts them implicitly. Her statement implies that the community of prostituted women hold unspoken values about the trust, behaviour and communication that should prevail within the group.

They therefore establish their own community, consisting exclusively of prostituted women. This fosters the sense of an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality; prostituted women versus society.

*They form a group called Masiphakameni, which means um, stand up, you must stand up as a woman, and stop to be violated by men and to show the government that they must support us, these women, because this is not a choice to go to the street.*

The support groups provide the space in which a true sense of community and independence can be established amongst the women. The excerpt above symbolises a strong sense of solidarity between women as they stand together to fight for their cause and to protect their community. The women are eager to expand upon their established community. One of the women made a suggestion regarding the introduction of health services.

*...and some of us like, we are treated bad in the clinics, some maybe they have STI's or HIV but they can't be treated well in the clinics, so we will like also for a tester to come so that the people can be free to test themselves.*

This suggestion reflects this woman's eagerness for her newfound community to function as an independent and self-sufficient entity. Prostituted women who attempt to access mainstream health services encounter discriminatory and judgemental behaviour from others (Brown et al., 2006). This woman believes that prostituted women should not be subjected to such stigmatization. Instead, she contends that health services should be provided within the safe space of the exit intervention. This highlights the importance of community based social support services in the encouragement of women to exit prostitution (Brown et al., 2006). This suggestion also conveys the message that effective interventions for marginalized groups need to adopt unique, non-traditional approaches to facilitating recovery in participants (Hotaling et al., 2004).

### **c) Physical support**

The exit intervention physically supports prostituted women through the provision of practical help in some areas. It also provides a space for women to share skills they may have acquired, in an attempt to help broaden their skill set. The women identified employment as an area of physical support that the exit intervention has been unable to

provide. This is a major source of stress for them as they view employment as their most urgent need because it relates to physical survival.

### **Practical help.**

Embrace Dignity views prostituted women as victims of male oppression. They argue against the belief that women choose to sell sex for a living. They believe that women are forced into it because they have no other means of survival. Although they acknowledge the dangers of selling sex, they are aware that these women have no other choice. They therefore do not judge the women. Understanding that exiting is a process, the intervention adopts a realistic approach. They therefore do not enforce abstinence; women are not required to abstain from prostitution in order to be part of the intervention (Hotaling et al., 2004). The intervention acknowledges that selling sex enables these women to support themselves and their children. The intervention therefore works alongside the women, showing their support, in an attempt to slowly encourage and facilitate their exit.

*They give us a lot of things. They tell us what we can do on the street. If you've got problem (pause). How to control yourself. How to..when you talk to the customer you must do that and that.*

This statement demonstrates a level of practical advice that the intervention provides. It seems that this woman in particular finds it useful when the intervention gives tips on how to handle certain situations on the street. It is possible that the information provides her with the confidence and skills necessary to survive on the street. The exit intervention also provides the women with other forms of practical help. Many of the women are dependent on the money they receive weekly, to the value of R20, to buy food for their families.

*...they give us something for buy food..*

Some of them also mentioned that they are grateful for the material assistance the intervention provides over the December festive season, which is a particularly difficult time for them.

*Masiphakameni buy us for grocery in December. Hey mos, Masiphakameni is number one.*

This woman is particularly grateful for the help that she receives from the intervention over the festive season.

### **Sharing of skills.**

The typical demographic of a prostituted woman in South Africa is a black female from a disadvantaged background (Gould & Fick, 2008). This woman is more than likely uneducated, and lacks the skills needed to make it in the mainstream working world. For lack of other qualifications or experiences, this woman makes money using the only commodity she feels she has left at her disposal, her body. When trying to exit prostitution however, lack of vocational skills makes it difficult for a woman to find work. Increasing her skills base is also a difficult task, as the prostituted woman is poor and outcast from society.

*..the group that we formed is a self-help, empowered like, group, which we, we, we when we in the group we support each other and if I've got like talent or skill, like sewing then I show the, the, the others and help the others also (pause) if they got problems.*

This woman highlights the reciprocal nature of sharing that occurs within the group. Sharing here refers to the sharing of vocational skills. Often, prostituted women attempting to exit are forced to think creatively and in an entrepreneurial manner in order to find ways to make money. The exit intervention provides a constructive forum for the sharing of various skills such as sewing, fabric painting and computer skills. The women learn from and teach each other within their established community. The exit intervention recruits volunteers to spend time teaching the women certain skills.

*I, I, when I come to Embrace Dignity I didn't even know how to type (pause) now (pause) I'm using computer.*

This woman was taught how to use the computer. This skill will better equip her to find a job. Learning a new skill might also have provided her with a sense of mastery and accomplishment which could increase her commitment to exiting prostitution.

### **Employment needs.**

Studies show that dire economic circumstances force women into prostitution (Brown et al., 2006; Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). Such women struggle to satisfy their basic needs on a daily basis. Mothers are in a particularly difficult situation because they need to provide for their children (Brown et al., 2006). They risk their lives to put food on the table for their children and are left feeling like bad mothers if they fail to provide.

*Even when I go to the truck stop sometimes and come back with bare hands (pause) and they have no food (long pause). It's too hard.*

*And that time my baby say 'mama, I want a bread' and I don't have even a cent.*

In this study, the greatest concern shared by the majority of women was securing employment to make money so that they could survive and support their families and children. 7 out of the 8 women spoke about selling sex as a way to get money to survive, to feed and clothe their children or to send their children to school. These women admitted that as much as they want to, and as hard as they have tried, they are unable to exit prostitution because their physical survival depends on the money gained from selling sex. They are forced into selling sex as a means of survival and are therefore exploited by society.

*I'm so worried, because I..I..can't survive without money you see. That's why I, uh, when I am here now in Embrace Dignity (pause) I say maybe they give us a job, whenever it is cleaning, whenever it is sewing, just something. Give us an interest. To buy food and clothes for children.*

*That's why I (yawns) I am going back to the road because I don't earn something from anywhere, you know, (pause) there's no one can support me that's why... I don't like that thing (starts crying). It's a dangerous game, I know (pause).*

*...because really really really it's not good what we are doing...nobody likes what she was doing, they don't like it, but poverty...and you've got children.*

*I try to stop but I don't have a choice because I'm not working.*

*We need to survive of course. Because without money you can't survive. We need bread on the table for our kids.*

The above excerpts show that despite women's dislike for selling sex, they do it in order to survive. Many of them feel they have no choice in the matter. The majority of women come from disadvantaged backgrounds, with incomplete or no schooling (Brown et al., 2006). Unfortunately, there are not many opportunities out there for unskilled, uneducated women. They are therefore unable to find work. Selling sex is one of the few options available to them for obtaining an income (Williamson, 2000). Lack of skills, no education and little or no work experience, compounded by issues of extreme poverty, make prostitution seem like their only choice (Brown et al., 2006).

*...but the job you need sometimes experience, and those women doesn't have experience..*

*mmm (long pause) if I can get work, im going to leave that voortrekker road, I am not going to go there anymore.*

*And then when I put out my CV they say they want a grade 12 and I've got no grade 12, I'm only grade 9.*

These statements reflect the difficulties that prostituted women face in trying to find employment when attempting to exit sex work.

*I would like Embrace Dignity to find jobs for us..I know it's an NGO, but I would like for them to get funds, if they can at least an example to maybe 10 or 5 people that they employ or like they take us as like (pause) they take us an outreach like a peer educators so that you can do outreach for the other women that are on the street, you see, because they will understand us because they know we know what happens there.*

This woman is clearly passionate about helping other prostituted women to exit, and has put thought into a plan that would not only meet her need for employment, but would also provide opportunities for other women as well as contribute to the growth of the organisation. Peer education is an appropriate and effective model to follow when attempting to help

prostituted women to exit as it is ideally suited to victims of exploitation (Hotaling et al., 2004). This suggestion also alludes to the possibility that the intervention should consider incorporating a vocational training and job placement programme to address the employment needs of prostituted women.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study explored prostituted women's experiences of Embrace Dignity, a South African exit intervention for prostituted women. Findings revealed that the women experience the intervention 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 'normal' job would enable them to exit prostitution. Unfortunately, due to their lack of education and skills, they are at a disadvantage in this regard.

### **Limitations and suggestions for further research**

This research employed an interpretative phenomenological framework, which aims to understand the meaning that participants assign to an experience. This study attempted to explore prostituted women's subjective experiences of a South African exit intervention. In order to understand the women's experiences according to an interpretative phenomenological approach, the researcher was required to rely on the participants' use of language; the words that were used and the manner in which they were used. This created a problem however, as none of the women spoke English fluently. The descriptions of their experiences and the manner in which the women spoke were therefore difficult to follow. They communicated in broken English. This language barrier limited their ability to speak freely and convey their experiences in the manner in which they were intended.

A larger sample size would have benefited the study by gathering a broader range of information about prostituted women's experiences of the exit intervention.

Selecting participants according to the requirement of a minimum of 6 months participation in the programme would have enabled a more comprehensive analysis of their experiences of the intervention.

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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## **Appendix A**

### **Consent Form**

You are invited to participate in research exploring interventions for sex workers in South Africa. Specifically, I am interested in your experience of Embrace Dignity's intervention model of self-help groups for sex workers. The feedback you provide will be used to change and improve the model, which will help interventions for sex workers in South Africa.

I am currently completing Honours in Psychology at UCT and this research will be used in support of my thesis.

#### **Participation in the study**

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. You will be ensured complete anonymity throughout the process. Participation in this study will involve an interview, which will be tape recorded for research purposes. You will have control over the tape recorder and may request that it be turned off at any point during the interview. You will be paid R50 as a token of appreciation for your participation in the study.

#### **Consent**

I have been briefed about the aims and details of the study. I am aware that I will be awarded complete anonymity for participation in the study.

I consent to participate in this study.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I have explained the study to the participant, and in my opinion she understands that participation is voluntary and is able to give informed consent.

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions about the study you can contact me on 084 8231934 or my research supervisor Dr. Despina Learmonth on (021) 650 3420.

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview for Participants**

The interviewer will use the questions below as a general guideline in which to conduct the interview. However, in line with the flexible nature of the semi-structured interview, the flow of the interview will be shaped by the participants' responses. The interviewer will use her discretion when deciding which comments to follow up on or when requesting that the participant elaborate on what she has said.

- Can you tell me about your experience/s of exiting/attempting to exit?
- How have you experienced the self-help groups offered by Embrace Dignity?
- How did you feel when participating in the self-help groups?
- What role have the self-help groups played in your life?
- What else would you add to this exit intervention if you had the opportunity to improve it? / OR / What else do you need from this exit intervention?