

EVIDENCE ON EXIT



An exploration of the context, motivation and support
for an exit out of sex work in South Africa



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Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| I: Introduction | 1 |
| II: Background Discussion | |
| 1. Rationale for the Study | 1 |
| 2. Literature Review | 2 |
| What is exiting? | 2 |
| Our approach and sex work as work | 4 |
| Theoretical approaches to exit | 8 |
| Delivery of exit programmes | 11 |
| III: Methodology | |
| Scope of research | 13 |
| Seminar | 13 |
| Focusgroups | 14 |
| Key informant interviews | 14 |
| Limitations | 14 |
| IV: Findings | |
| 1. Staying in or getting out | 15 |
| What works about sex work and what makes us leave? | 15 |
| Major obstacles associated with exit | 19 |
| 2. Programmes and Interventions in South Africa | 21 |
| What are the most important services required if a sex worker is to exit? | 21 |
| What elements may determine success or failure in exit programmes? | 23 |
| V: Recommendations | 27 |
| VI: Supporting Change | |
| A New Model to Support Sex Workers Who Want to Transition out of Sex Work | 29 |
| Annex 1: Programme Delivery | 32 |
| Endnotes | 35 |

I. INTRODUCTION

This study and the recommendations that result from it will assist organisations and institutions who provide services to sex workers to respond to individuals who wish to exit out of sex work.

The document lays out our rationale for the study, its methodology and results and our recommendations in the form of a Model of intervention.

It is our hope that organisations providing services to sex workers will recognise that their current programmes may already have the potential to provide person-centred and demand driven support to sex workers who wish to transition out of sex work. Further, those institutions and organisations focusing on exit only as a strategy of support to people who sell sex, will find our Model useful as routed in the experiences of those people.

This document fills a significant gap in research, and intends to place the voices of people who sell sex centrally in the development of evidence based exit programmes.

A note on terminology: We use the term exit throughout this report since it is a commonly used term, but acknowledge it to be an imperfect description of a complex process that is not one-directional.

II. BACKGROUND DISCUSSION

1. Rationale for the study

A 2008 study by SWEAT among 164 female sex workers in Cape Town found that a woman with only primary education could earn up to four or five times more doing sex work than in any other job she would be eligible for such as waitressing, working in the beauty sector or retail, assuming she could find a job at all in the prevailing environment of 25% unemployment. A high school graduate could still earn 2.8 times more in sex work than in any other job compatible with her qualifications. A woman who has completed tertiary studies could earn 1.5 times more in sex work.

This is the report of a project that undertook an investigation of existing strategies and interventions that support sex workers who choose to implement alternative economic activities or who choose to transition out of sex work. The study has been undertaken by the Sex Workers Educational and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) and supported by the South African National Aids Council (SANAC), the International Labour Organisation and Sisonke, with funding provided by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

In particular the project aims to contribute to the South African National Sex Worker HIV Plan 2016-2019, which includes a package of care related to economic empowerment.¹ As the plan acknowledges, "sex work remains a pragmatic means of earning a living for many in South Africa for a number of reasons: high unemployment rates, the fact that entering sex work requires no formal qualifications, and the pressing need to provide for dependents, often without the support of a spouse (sic)."² A 2013 study sponsored by SANAC estimated that there were approximately 153000 sex workers (self-



identified male, female or transgender adults selling sex) working in South Africa. This community remains highly marginalised, at high risk of HIV infection and subject to discrimination from health services, law enforcement and society at large.

The 'economic empowerment' component of the above plan is significant in that it acknowledges that "sex workers should be accorded the same rights as all other informal workers to safe and fair working conditions, with ongoing skills training, access to bank accounts and fair credit programmes, and the same potential to support their families and plan for their future as all other members of the wider community."³ This package refers to career pathing; educational improvement and participation in co-ops. These interventions are based on the principle that whether sex workers opt to remain in sex work, exit or pursue sex work part-time, they should have access to programmes that empower them, build their skill base and expand their range of income generating options.

2. Literature Review

What is exiting?

This report uses the term exit along with 'transitioning' to describe the process of leaving sex work voluntarily- in order to remain consistent with the language used both in existing research and by most organisations working in the field.

The idea of stopping sex work, generally known in the literature as exiting has been researched and written about extensively. Some scholars suggest that it may draw its significance "in part from its position as a compromise between the conflicting feminist views on sex work that influence public debate."⁴ As Ham explains, whatever side of the debate organisations might be on, they generally agree that women who want to leave sex work should be supported to do so.⁵

However as research around sex work has become more nuanced, there has also been acknowledgment that the term exiting may be perceived negatively since it is applied only to the sex industry and therefore is stigmatising. It is arguable too that the term has come to be associated with the framing of sex work as inherently traumatic and/or immoral, and thus it is posited as an escape from such a situation. In addition, exit denotes a sort of finality, as though it is a rigid one way street to giving up sex work. Available research suggests that this is not the case and that exiting tends to be a "lengthy, non-linear process" during which most sex workers will leave and return, sometimes several times.⁶ Indeed one Cape Town study revealed that more than 70% of indoor and street based sex workers interviewed, already worked 'on and off'.⁷ Ham suggests that understanding this concept of mobility within sex workers' working lives would be a more useful lens through which to look at exiting and indeed through which to develop related programming.

During the seminar held to launch the current project, several participants suggested that the term 'transitioning' to refer to the process was more useful and more accurate and that the term exit implied a lack of flexibility as well as negative judgement on sex workers who decide to leave and then return to sex work for any reason. Participating sex workers also suggested that a focus on career planning and professional development would be a less stigmatising and more positive approach.

"Exit is engaging individuals within an enabling environment, which allows them to make informed choices with regard to career pathing, income generation and economic security."

Evidence on Exit Seminar, Group work, November 2016

✓ economic empowerment

✓ growth in self-esteem

✓ reducing violence

✓ better health

✓ reducing vulnerabilities

During a process of brainstorming around the potential definitions for exit the following key areas of emphasis emerged:

- an enabling environment which is empowering and supportive
- adequate provision of information so that informed decision making can take place
- broadening the range of income generating choices available
- individualised, non-discriminatory and accessible process, allowing for multi-directional movement

We also aimed to examine what participants thought of as the point or goal of exit. Interestingly, very few participants suggested that leaving sex work and never going back to it would be the ultimate goal. Rather, they suggested that the aims of exiting or exploring routes out of sex work would be a series of positive changes including:

- increase in income generating choices
- increased ability to say no to activities or clients that one is not comfortable with
- growth in self-esteem and pride
- reducing violence
- attaining financial security
- attaining better health
- reducing vulnerabilities

Research supports this view that the emphasis should be on 'economic empowerment' or increasing income generating options which can ultimately improve the health, safety and well-being of sex workers. In other words,

“With more diverse sources of income and savings, sex workers are better able to avoid violent clients, take rest in times of illness or pregnancy, and deal with emergencies. As such, economic empowerment is an important factor in improving sex workers’ access to health care, psycho-social support and protection from violence to ultimately improve their health, safety and well-being.”⁸

This is in line with the approach of sex work as work, wherein goals of transition are not framed around ideas of rescue and salvation but rather around practical concerns common to other jobs - such as increasing well-being, better health, better working conditions, earning better money etc.

In the next section, we discuss further what 'sex work as work' means as well as what it would mean for sex work to be 'decent work.'

Our approach and sex work as work

SWEAT, throughout its 20 year history, has advocated for a rights-based approach to sex work, and for an end to stigma. This research study uses this approach with the perspective that choosing to sell sex is an individual choice within the constraints of an individual's economic, social, political and personal circumstances. SWEAT believes that sex work is work and we campaign for the inclusion of sex workers as respected and valued members of society entitled to the same protections and benefits as others. We therefore use the term sex worker, rather than 'prostitute' or the passive term 'prostituted women' (although you may see these terms used when quoting people we interviewed or when citing documents). We distinguish adult consensual sex work from all forms of trafficking which we define according to the United Nations definition and recognise as a gross violation of human rights.

Waiting for an elevator, I overhear long lost friends. They hadn't seen each other for some time, warmly hugged and began a conversation. "I'm not working here anymore, I've gone up to the top!" the one said. "really? Now you work high up?!" the other responded. They exchanged words about improved lives, easier work, not being on their feet all day, and suffering under the oppression of others. The one bragging about her improved status laughingly confesses that she was joking, that no, she has not moved up. The other woman and her colleagues tell her "one day is one day, believe in yourself!" "yes," she responds, "keep trying". Transition from one form of work to another, and improving ones life is not an unusual concept. The conversation above was between nurses at a major hospital.

(Source: Executive director of SWEAT)

It should be clear that a recognition of sex work as work is not an isolated idea. The global network of sex workers (NSWP) comprised of 237 sex worker led organisations and groups from over 71 countries all endorse acceptance of sex work as work. These groups represent a wide range of cultures, religions, genders, age groups, working conditions and ethnicities. In addition, international agencies who have recognised sex work as work and supported the call for decriminalisation include the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Joint U.N Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), which includes UN Women as well as Amnesty International.⁹ The International Labour Office, in its recommendation number 200, also recognises sex work as work and offers protection to all sex workers.

The United Nations defines human trafficking as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person, having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation."

*“even when
done in
unacceptable
conditions,
sex work is
work.”*



The ILO Recommendation No. 200 recognises that sex work is work and offers protection to all sex workers

- It covers all workers working under all forms or arrangements at all workplaces, including in any employment or occupation and in all sectors of economic activity, including the formal and informal economies (paragraph 2).
- Workplaces are defined as any place in which workers perform their activity and workers include persons working under any form or arrangement (paragraph 1).

ILO Recommendation concerning HIV and AIDS and the World of Work, 2010 (No. 200)

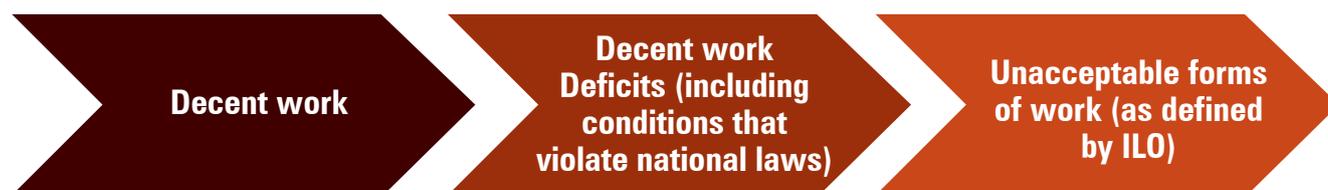
To counter the oft made point that sex work should not be looked at as work because of the violence and poor working conditions faced by many sex workers, activists explain that many other forms of labour are also extremely exploitative but this does not stop them being work. In other words, “even when done in unacceptable conditions, sex work is work.” It is vital,

“to recognize[sex work] as work, even in situations where that work is deeply exploitative, as many other forms of labour are, in order to create better working conditions and reduce the stigma and violence associated with sexual labour.”¹⁰

In this view, the existence of exploitation or sub standard working conditions should be addressed by the state as with any other industry and sex workers should have rights vis a vis the state as any other workers do. With this perspective the idea of ‘career development’ or exit must firstly be looked at through a lens of how relevant this is in the Global South and in the context of survival. Most people in the world work to survive and large numbers of these work in the ‘informal sector’, often in exploitative and precarious working conditions which fall far short of the ideal of ‘decent work’. In South Africa the informal sector is the fastest growing sector, and in the third quarter of 2016, accounted for 16.7% of the total employment. 37% of people employed in the informal sector were women.¹¹ Many people working in the informal sector face severe restrictions and policing – particularly those working in public spaces. For instance ‘Operation Clean Sweep’ conducted in 2013 in Johannesburg removed 6000 informal traders from the city and resulted in many of their goods being confiscated.¹² The ILO frames the situation of those in the informal economy in terms of decent work ‘deficits’. These deficits include inadequate social protection, jobs that are not recognised or protected by law and the absence of rights at work.¹³

Reducing these deficits in the immediate term according to the ILO requires “ensuring that those who are currently in the informal economy are recognised in the law and have rights, legal and social protection and representation and voice.”¹⁴ This has direct bearing on how the work and rights of sex workers are perceived and is relevant for sex workers globally and in South Africa particularly in light of the South African Law Reform Commission (SALRC) report¹⁵ recommending full criminalisation as the preferred option for sex work in the country.

Organisations which view sex work within a labour framework argue that sex work can be ‘decent work’, but that this is impossible within a criminalised context. For instance, the Empower Foundation in Thailand undertook a mapping of sex workers in the country to attempt to define their situation along a continuum ranging from:



They suggest that “neglect and isolation from labour protection and the criminalisation of sex work are incompatible with decent work principles of freedom, equity, security and dignity” and that if criminal law were replaced by labour protections sex workers could indeed move along the continuum towards attaining ‘decent work’.¹⁶

Organisations with a focus on ensuring social protections for women in the informal economies see organising workers as a key strategy to gain social protections, while campaigning for recognition and inclusion in labour law and policy.¹⁷ This implies a wider view of the concept of exit as the focus is broadened to include improving current working conditions, organising workers for collective action and addressing policy and legal frameworks in sex work. This is evident in work that links the struggles of marginalised women workers such as a project by the Oxfam Women’s Rights Programme’s (OWRAP) *Organising Marginalised and Vulnerable Women Workers* which, in 2014, brought together sex workers, home based carers and farm workers.¹⁸

“At the root of the challenges we face is the position we have in society as poor black women. Our work is not seen as proper and legitimate work... we face corruption and deal with middle men and women daily – people in power who take bribes for health department and public works jobs, labour brokers and the police. The system allows them to benefit at our expense.”

(Source: No One should be Oppressed: Writing about our lives and struggles. Oxfam South Africa)

4 MAIN TYPES OF SEX WORKER



IT ARGUES AGAINST A 'ONE SIZE FITS ALL' APPROACH



THE GROUPS "ARE **BY NO MEANS STATIC**, AND INDIVIDUALS MAY NAVIGATE THROUGH ALL **4 GROUPS** AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIFE/ CAREER."



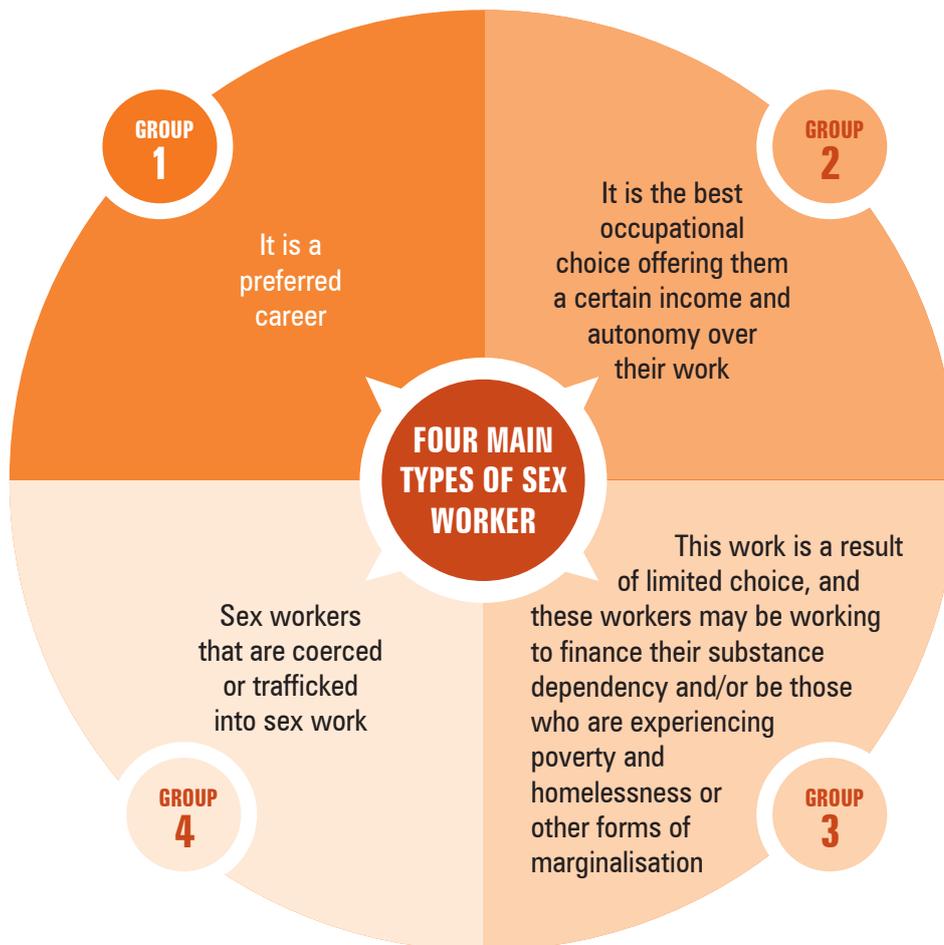
FOR SEX WORKERS FROM MARGINALISED GROUPS 'ALTERNATIVE EMPLOYMENT' OPTIONS MAY BE **NON-EXISTENT**

The table below summarises deficits from a labour perspective:

| PRECARIOUSNESS | DISORGANISATION | POLICY/LEGAL FRAMEWORKS | STRUCTURAL ISSUES |
|--|---|---|--|
| Low pay | Work in isolation | Poor knowledge of legal rights and recourse | High unemployment |
| Insecure hours of work | No access to workplace training or HR functions | Limited or no access to occupational health standards, compensation rights | Gendered / racialized unemployment |
| Temporary | Low or no levels of unionisation | Low or no regulatory oversight | High inequality |
| No benefits | Culture of workplace exploitation | Policy and laws unequally applied | High levels of gender based violence |
| Work is under threat | Work is stigmatised or considered 'inferior' | Lack of legal protections and framework result in high levels of corruption/ abuse of power by state actors | Poverty |
| Work is racialised and gendered (eg: domestic work) | | | Large numbers of undocumented migrants |
| Inequalities in access to and control over resources | | | |

Theoretical approaches to exit

As mentioned above, extensive research and writing has been done around the idea of exit especially in the global North. Several models have been postulated or applied from other fields to explain the process of change that exit involves and researchers have also formulated typologies related to types of sex workers to determine which interventions might be most appropriate in different situations. For instance, Pat and Mossman postulated that there are four main types of sex worker:



This typology is useful because it argues against a 'one size fits all' approach and can be used to determine what different services and structures would be required to assist sex workers from these groups to find alternative employment. However, it should be noted that the groups "are by no means static, and individuals may navigate through all four groups at some point in their life/career."¹⁹ In addition, it should be acknowledged that for sex workers from marginalised groups including transgender people, those living with mental health issues and those coping with addiction, 'alternative employment' options may be non-existent.

There are multiple different theoretical models which are often cited and may be useful when planning service delivery or programme interventions. Whilst addressing them all is not within the scope of this report, we present two below.



“Cycle of Change Model uses a rights based approach acknowledging sex worker’s right to remain in sex work and to support whether they decide to stop selling sex or not.”

Stages of Change Model: Prochaska, Norcross and Diclemente (1998)²⁰

One useful model that has been utilised to examine exiting issues of sex workers is the ‘Cycle of Change Model’, suggested by Prochaska et al. and adapted by the United Kingdom Network of Sex Work Projects (UKNSWP).

UKNSWP has suggested that the six main stages in the model could be applied to sex workers who want to stop selling sex as follows²¹:

| STAGE | POTENTIAL ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOUR OF SEX WORKER |
|-------------------|---|
| Pre-Contemplation | Acceptance of current circumstances; occasionally uses the services of drop-in or outreach but does not engage further with service providers |
| Contemplation | Services being accessed more frequently; dissatisfaction about the circumstances, beginning to think about the future |
| Decision | Help is requested from service providers to deal with issues, makes the decision to change her life and the intention is made public |
| Action | Attending scheduled meetings/programme; proactive in making required changes |
| Maintenance | Optimism, regularly attending appointments, looking after health and hygiene |
| Relapse | Sporadic drug use and occasional sex work, may start missing appointments, disengagement with service provider who will have difficulty contacting the individual |

As UKNSWP points out, “understanding this cycle is important for any workers who are helping people exit street sex work. They should be able to recognise the different stages and know the interventions which are appropriate at each stage.”²² This can assist sex workers in successfully exiting or getting to the next stage in the cycle. For instance, proper motivational interviews are needed during the contemplation stage and specific information, options and choices should be laid out during the decision stage - including information about relapse possibilities and strategies.

This model and the way it has been adapted is particularly useful because it uses a rights based approach, acknowledging sex workers’ right to remain in sex work and to support and services whether they decide to stop selling sex or not. It recognises that sex workers may be in any one of these stages for varied periods of time - from days to years and may move back and forth within them but will continue to need support if they do make a decision to stop selling sex. In this regard, UKNSWP points out there is a need for sex work projects to work holistically, “rather than being preoccupied with exiting, and [they should be offering] both generic support services as well as exiting programmes.”²³

Sanders: Typology of Transitions

Sanders proposes a model examining reasons for wanting to stop selling sex and looks at the triggers and barriers that indoor and street sex workers encounter from a personal as well as structural perspective. She proposes a typology of four “routine pathways out of sex work”²⁴ including reactionary, gradual planning, natural progression, and yo-yoing.²⁵

| TYPE OF TRANSITION | TRIGGER FOR STREET WORKER | TRIGGER FOR INDOOR WORKER |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Reactionary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence • Ill health • Significant life events (pregnancy, child removal, imprisonment) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New relationship • Being Discovered • Violence |
| Gradual Planning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug treatment programme • Rehousing • Welfare support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timed transition alongside alternative career • Financial planning |
| Natural progression | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire for a new safer lifestyle that is drug free • Concerned about working conditions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age • Natural career length • Disillusionment with working conditions • Lack of regulation |
| Yo-yoing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failed drug treatment and support package • Drift in and out • Criminal justice involvement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unplanned exit • Psychological strain • Working ‘on and off’ • Career break |

The usefulness of this model rests in the fact that it addresses the reasons for exit which “can be an important component in terms of assessing motivation and fostering transitions out” but it does not look at the processes that take place before the ‘trigger’ occurs.²⁶

Finally, Kootstra points out that when examining exiting from sex work certain other considerations should also be forefronted.²⁷ These include understanding that:

- sex workers often return to sex work even if they have left many times
- not all sex workers want to leave sex work
- stigma, harassment and discrimination from society is often cited as a reason for wanting to leave

In addition, interesting research by Bowen shows that models do not account for what she describes as ‘duality’, an approach whereby the transition strategy includes continuing with sex work, maintaining certain clients and with sex workers “positioning themselves in a way that allows them to take advantage of opportunities in both worlds.”²⁸

According to Bowen, Duality remains,

“an under-researched element of sex work transitioning (and) represents resistance to dichotomised ways in which sex work involvement is conceptualised — one is either in, or out, successful or defeated.”

“rehabilitation programmes did not reduce the numbers of sex workers, violence against sex workers or improve their working conditions”

Delivery of exit programmes

Globally exiting programmes have “ranged from holistic support services to coercive interventions, and are implemented by a range of bodies: NGOs, government funded health and support services and church groups.”³⁰

Mayhew and Mossman have proposed a typology for the ideologies that shape how and by whom these services are delivered.³¹ As shown in the diagram below, these include “seeing sex work as an illegal activity (result: police and justice system involvement), as an immoral activity (result: rehabilitation efforts), as violence against women (result: victim status and rescue programmes), as a social problem (result: addressing social support systems).”³² Another ideological category has been added to this model by Kootstra, whereby sex work is seen as a labour issue with the result that labour organizing services are required. We have depicted this addition in the diagram below.



Rescue and Rehabilitation

As is clear from the typology above, where sex work is considered coerced or 'immoral' behavior the focus is on 'rescue', 'recovery' and 'reintegration' and the goal is on getting sex workers to leave the sector permanently. Although services and packages may include critical aspects (social, psychological, medical and vocational), they will usually also involve religious instruction and spiritual guidance.³³ Whilst many of these initiatives are seen as inherently benevolent, specific interventions have been critiqued as violating critical ethical standards with exiting programming often reflecting the ideological approach of a specific organisation or government rather than the realities and needs of sex workers lives.

Indeed researchers suggest that the idea of exit may well have fostered the "growth of a 'rescue industry' premised on the idea of naïve, passive victims requiring 'rescue' or 'saving' from the sex industry."³⁴ This is especially true of anti-trafficking interventions that conflate sex work with trafficking. Global evidence shows that adult sex workers have been 'rounded up' in 'raid and rescue' operations run by NGOs and Governments and forcibly kept in rehabilitation shelters regardless of their consent.³⁵

The last decade has also seen a proliferation of 'rehabilitation' programmes often run in conjunction with HIV prevention initiatives. One study by Crago and Arnott, focusing on Southern Africa, found that funds meant for prevention initiatives were being used to create income generation programmes for sex workers with the aim of reducing numbers of people in sex work. These programmes have been considered problematic in several ways not least because of the conditionality aspect wherein sex workers could only participate if they claimed to have given up all sex work. The researchers found that none of the respondents in their research who had completed the 'rehabilitation' programmes had managed to obtain gainful employment from their training and indeed were often in a worse position than before once the programme was completed. They also found that the rehabilitation programmes did not reduce the numbers of sex workers, violence against sex workers or improve their working conditions.³⁶

Diversion

The ethics and indeed efficacy of 'diversion' programmes run by the criminal justice system in various countries have also been called into question.³⁷ Activists point out that forcing sex workers into 'diversion' programmes by the threat of criminal action "treats sex workers as criminals rather than as people at risk who may need specialised services" and perpetuates the dislike and distrust that sex workers may have for state authorities and service providers.³⁸ This is of particular concern in the light of the recent SALRC report recommending 'diversion' as,

*"an opportunity to address the vulnerability and marginalisation of prostitutes through skilling and education, to enable their inclusion in the formal economy."*³⁹

The commission goes on to state that,

*"following successful diversion, rehabilitation, training and reintegration, a former prostitute's prior criminal record should be expunged (and) that the prospect of having a clean record could be used as a factor that motivates women to exit prostitution and begin a new life, fully equipped to integrate into society."*⁴⁰

This seems a spurious assumption in light of the levels of unemployment and the lack of income generating alternatives available in South Africa at this point. In addition, our research found that very few sex workers mentioned having a criminal record as a major issue.

The cost and complexity of running a diversion programme in South Africa would also be prohibitive with a conservative population estimate of over 153,000 sex workers, and diversion programmes currently being employed only in cases involving children.

III. METHODOLOGY OF THE INVESTIGATION

Scope of the Research

The objective of the research was to learn as much as possible about exit and what it means for sex workers in South Africa. Towards this end the broad research questions related to:

- what does the term exit mean to individual sex workers - do they use this term and does it have relevance for them
- what does exit mean to organisations working with sex workers
- triggers for exit (the reasons individuals may decide to leave sex work)
- challenges faced when individuals decide to leave sex work
- experiences and learning around critical services that sex workers need should they decide to exit
- structural elements that cause exiting initiatives to be successful or to fail
- description of strategies and programme interventions being used in South Africa

The project aimed to provide an evidence base in this area by conducting primary research in South Africa, engaging with sex workers themselves through participatory focus groups and interviewing key stakeholders in the field. In November 2016 a seminar was held to launch the research. This was attended by 34 key stakeholders including 11 organisations. Some of the key findings and discussions from the seminar are also included in this report. Finally desktop research was conducted to enable comparative learning from examinations of other projects globally specifically looking at their strategies and outcomes.

Seminar

The project started with a seminar to which organisations, identified as working on services for sex workers and/or programmes oriented around routes out of sex work, were invited to present lessons from their interventions. A call for participation was sent out and placed on social media platforms. The one-day seminar took place in Cape Town in November 2016 and the content of the discussions were documented to include in this report, and in the planning of focus group and key informant interviews.

Focus Group Discussions

Six focus group discussions (FGDs) were held in 3 provinces with a total of 66 sex workers. The FGDs were held in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg and were coordinated by Sisonke who reached out to network members to invite participants. The FGDs were facilitated sessions lasting 2 hours each. Each session was audio recorded after obtaining the informed consent of each participant.

Criteria for selection of participants was simple stipulating that they must:

- be female or transgender adult women⁴¹ (over 18)
- represent a range of backgrounds if possible⁴²
- represent a range of exit intentions including those who might have exited, those not interested in exiting, and those who may have gone back and forth



Key Informant Interviews

The research also involved interviews with Key Informants (KIs). A list of potential KIs was compiled through SWEAT and its partner organisations. A key informant interview questionnaire was created targeted at organisations or individuals working in the field with a specific focus on those running exit programmes for sex workers. These were identified through SWEAT's Helpline, staff and through desk-top searches. The list included organisations, individuals and networks with varying perspectives, including anti-trafficking, church or faith based and policy advocacy groups. Requests were sent for participation in skype, telephonic or in person interviews. The questionnaire was also uploaded onto an online survey for those who preferred to complete it online.⁴³

Of 24 potential KIs identified and contacted, 10 responded affirmatively and were willing to participate in the study. Of these 10, 2 agreed to interviews in-person or on the telephone. The rest opted to submit responses online. Two explained that our research was not relevant to the work that they did. Three organisations declined to participate. The rest did not respond to repeated email or phone communication.

Limitations

This project would have benefitted from having more time and resources allocated to it. It would have been useful to travel and visit the relevant projects and observe operations at local sites. Whilst most stakeholders preferred to submit responses online, the quality of data collection is necessarily hindered by questions being skipped and the lack of depth in some answers.

Our data collection from organisations working on the ground yielded limited results in terms of numbers of organisations that chose to respond to our interview requests. Whilst some were constrained by lack of time, it is important to acknowledge the highly politicised and debated landscape within which this work is being done. There are a number of assumptions that underpin the commonly accepted imperative for sex workers to exit sex work – some are motivated by religious or moral leanings, others frame sex work as violence and therefore exit is rescue. Many of the organisations working on the ground in South Africa approach 'exit' from a religious 'restoration' or trafficking survivor standpoint, or both and were not comfortable with our approach to this issue.

As one faith-based organisation put it, "this survey is highly problematic in that many of the questions are loaded in support of particular view, i.e. that prostitution is considered 'work', a controversial notion at best."⁴⁵ In addition, some organisations that see their work in terms of rescue of exploited women forced to sell sex (for instance shelters or anti-trafficking organisations) felt that the framing of this project in terms of sex workers *choosing to transition out of sex work* was irrelevant to their work and they were ambivalent about being interviewed. We also faced suggestions that this approach was unconstitutional and that "we can only imagine that this sort of language is included to appease foreign donors."⁴⁶

We approached the project with the view that organisations can learn from each other's work in this area regardless of their specific perspective on sex work and that it was important to make varied interventions more visible and open to review. The framing of people who sell sex into polarised ends of what is in reality a spectrum means complexity and nuance is missing from services and that many are based on an ideology rather than on client-centred responses.

Whilst it would have been useful to have larger numbers of organisations participate in the project, we are grateful that several organisations with varied approaches (including those that took issue with our approach and definitions) did take the time to contribute to this research.

IV. FINDINGS

1. Staying in or getting out

a. What works about sex work and what makes us want to leave

Sex workers who enter the profession by choice are able to articulate several advantages to being in sex work. The most positive aspects of the job per the vast majority of the sex workers in the FGDs were the income, their independence and the flexibility of the work environment. The money is a significant draw not only because the potential earnings are higher than anything else on offer but also because of the daily nature of the earning. As Lindiwe⁷¹ explained, “If we can decide we need the money we will get it, we don’t have to wait until the end of the month.”⁴⁷ Several women explained that they were used to being able to earn every day and that the idea of having to wait for money should they urgently need it was very stressful.

Another perceived advantage to sex work is the aspect of being self-reliant, capable and able to support oneself and one’s children and many women expressed that they felt satisfaction because of this. Lisa explained,



“there is nothing good about sex work but it helps you to feed your children and send money home. I got all my children through school and now I am helping my children raise their children since they can’t earn enough in their jobs.”⁴⁸

The majority of FGD participants also agreed that a big advantage of sex work is the flexibility and being their own bosses or as explained by Juliet from Durban, “We get to decide what time we start, what time we finish, we are our own bosses—we are self-employed.” As also stated by Lara, from Cape Town, “I decide what time I want to go to work, I decide how long I stand on the corner and I decide who I go with.”

The discussion around the positive aspects of sex work also highlighted some, perhaps less obvious, points including having control over one’s body and sexual relationships. As Valerie from Durban explained,

“In sex work-no one forces you to have unprotected sex — at home other boys force us because they don’t want condoms but when you are in the road you have your power-you stand on your own and you can say no I don’t want this or that and I won’t do this without a condom.”



“the most positive aspects of the job were the income, their independence and the flexibility of the work environment”

In a similar vein Tandi from Johannesburg explained,



"If you are going to be raped and beaten at home, rather do sex work — I make more money than what my husband used to earn — and he used to abuse me. I would rather do this than be in a relationship when I'm having to give sex for free and I can't do anything because I am under someone else's power."

Again, this reflects the concept of sex work as liberating in some way, affording an independence that allows women to leave abusive homes or relationships and look after themselves, although violence from clients is also a pervasive part of their experiences as sex workers.

Finally, participants explained that there is no discrimination in sex work and that anyone can do it regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race or type of person. Indeed, as explained during an interview with a stakeholder who has run a sex workers' helpline for many years,

"I have spoken to all types of sex workers, white, black, foreign, locals, different religions, street based and brothel based. I have spoken to professionals with degrees who want to be in sex work - it's a way of surviving that they just choose for themselves. You find all types and it picks up anyone. The only qualification you need is dedication and willingness to do the job. Can you do the job?"



The decision to exit or find alternative ways to earn an income may be triggered off by several factors. Research shows that these include a significant life event such as falling pregnant or falling in love, fear of a violent attack, increased competition, a health or drug crisis, loss of a child and increased fear of arrest.⁴⁹ Other triggers include age and the realisation that sex work isn't forever and alternative plans for the long term may need to be made. In addition, Harris describes 'decade shifts' or a desire for change based on people's expectations of where their lives should be going. For example, several sex workers in the focus groups spoke about their distress at the thought of grown up children realising what they did for a living. As Amanda, from Cape Town, explained,



"I am thinking, one of these days my daughter is going to be a teenager and what kind of example am I setting? I don't want her to follow the same footsteps — I would never forgive myself. I want to get out of this business. I am 38 and I want to do this for myself and for my kids."⁵⁰

Another participant reiterated this point, "Any one of us would like to exit — we have kids and none of us want our children to see us on the streets."⁵¹

“the discrimination is huge — I can’t even open a bank account”



“people shout and call us bad names”



“cops can arrest us, they abuse us and we have to pay bribes”



“you are scared that people will judge you”

Triggers may also be age related. Several women spoke about the fact that sex work after a certain age was simply not feasible. This was in terms of both older children and physical health as well as competition on the streets. As Lisa from Durban explained,



“I am old and my children are grown up. I can’t be wearing these tiny clothes and even doing the washing is a problem - because how can I hang these garments on a washing line that family members can see? My health is not right and I am HIV- positive which also means I am more vulnerable to pneumonia and other illnesses.”⁵²

Competition on the streets was mentioned as a challenge in all the FGDs and seems to act as a trigger after a certain point in a sex worker’s career. Several participants mentioned that there are many younger girls on the streets now and that clients would opt for them first. Nomezi from Durban explained,

“I started at 14 and I used to make money fast. Now there is so much competition, every day a new girl on the streets and your customer even asks you if there is a new girl. He even pays us sometimes to bring him someone new.”⁵³



Sanders points out in her study, involving in-depth interviews with 30 exited sex workers in the United Kingdom, that some triggers may be quite different or have differential impact depending on the specific sectors of sex work.⁵⁴ For instance, her research revealed that fears around safety and being attacked as well as concern over arrest on the street was a more prominent trigger for street sex workers than for indoor sex workers. Similarly, while sex workers from both sectors spoke of a ‘natural progression’ street sex workers were more likely to define this in terms of changing a lifestyle that severely threatened their lives and health as opposed to a consideration related to age and longevity of the career.⁵⁵ Indeed many women in the FGDs spoke out about violence that they faced and how this had made them want to leave sex work.

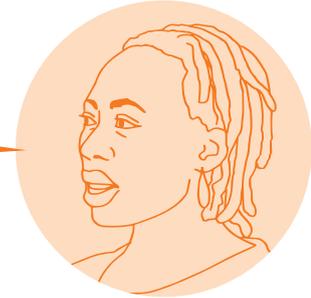
For instance, Genelle, from Durban, stated,

“for me, I’m not stopping but I feel like I would like to because of the violence but I don’t have any choice right now.”



Anna reiterated,

“the main thing that discourages me is violence. It’s like we are not people and for us justice is not being served. This is the main thing for me but I have to work for the money.”⁵⁶



Shaanika from Johannesburg explained,



“One day I was abused by a client and I thought no! I want to leave this job now! I tried depositing CVs everywhere. But I had no luck. Then I went back.”⁵⁷

Sex workers in the FGDs also spoke about the extreme levels of stigma and discrimination faced from society and many suggested that their work would be much easier if this did not exist.

Stigma and Discrimination Persists

“the discrimination is huge — the service providers of this country stigmatise us and don’t offer us the same rights whether it is law enforcement or health services. We don’t have other benefits either — housing subsidies or medical aid. I can’t even open a bank account.”

“people shout and call us bad names”,

“cops can arrest us, they abuse us and we have to pay bribes”,

“you are risking your own life and in addition police will rape you when you go to report”

“you don’t have the courage to open up about your job because you are scared that people will judge you”

“it is really difficult to go to public hospitals — they say what kind of business are you doing? What do you do? Bring your partner. Then we don’t want to go back.”

Major obstacles associated with exiting

- Criminal record
- Drug use
- Housing issues
- Health
- Education, training and employment

Research shows that “the decision to work in or transition out of sex work can be a highly personal decision influenced by a diverse range of motivations and experiences.” It was clear during the FGDs that most participants did not consider the idea of exit as particularly relevant to themselves or their lives. Whilst they were willing to discuss the pros and cons of sex work, their aspirations and even their dream jobs, most of them had not attempted to leave sex work and did not consider it an option at this stage. It was also clear that for those who had considered it or attempted it, it remained a fluid decision and not something they were willing to be absolute about. As Amaana from Durban explained,

“I used to be a sex worker but I don’t like to say I have quit. I don’t know what the future is holding for me. So far I have a boyfriend and a daughter and my boyfriend is supporting both of us. But let’s say today he comes back from work and leaves me — I will go back to sex work. Yes I will look for a job ...until then sex work.”



Part of this complex web of motivations may be the feeling of economic security that sex work provides as well as a sense of ‘job security’, something that a person knows, is familiar with and has the resources and experience to do and even to do well. Several participants spoke about sex work as something they could rely on because they knew they could do it. As Maria from Cape Town said,

“sex work is not my full-time occupation, I do other things but sex work will always be there — something to fall back on. I know I have a client I can phone and in a way it’s a life saver and not something I would want to exit in the sense of leaving it forever...unless maybe I come to a point when I become very religious!”



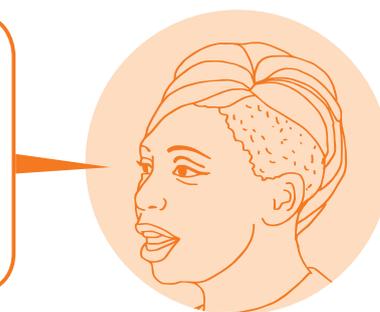
b. Major Obstacles associated with Exiting

The UKNSWP has identified specific challenges associated with leaving sex work as well as strategies that would be required to deal with these by stakeholders involved with exit programmes. The challenges arise from individual, structural and community constraints and include issues related to criminal records, existing drug use, housing issues, family and domestic abuse and physical and mental health.⁵⁹ In addition, indoor sex workers may face different obstacles to those that street based sex workers face when it comes to finding routes out of the profession.

Criminal Record: Sex workers often have some sort of a criminal record which may include offences related to prostitution, drug use, violence or fraud. This can present serious challenges when it comes to seeking employment or even to attend training and educational courses.

Drug use: For sex workers who are dependent on drugs it is critical to find appropriate services. This aspect of leaving sex work was brought up by organisations in the KIs as well as sex workers during the FGDs since dealing with addiction is essential if sex workers are to lessen their reliance on sex work. As Doreen from Durban explained,

"I tried to exit and I went to rehab first. It was really hard for me because of the way I was treated by the other girls. I faced a lot of discrimination — most of the girls were there for drug addiction and many had been raped and here I was selling my body. I don't think I could go there again. Maybe there is a place that only sex workers can go for rehab."



This illustrates the importance of services that are non-judgmental, non stigmatising and supportive.

Housing issues: Street based sex workers especially may need housing or shelter for a period of time. However, crisis accommodation often involves "rigid policies about curfews, visitors, drug use and children all of which adversely affect this service user group."⁶⁰ Researchers suggest "specialized housing for sex workers (both in the form of shelter and transitional housing) which is 24-hour staffed, low-barrier, free of arbitrary and exclusionary policies, and supports transitioning along with provision of other essential services..."⁶¹

Health: Access to physical and mental health services are important for sex workers who have often faced high levels of violence and abuse. Research shows that "surviving this by self-medication, including street drugs, is common and inevitably leads to more complex mental health issues." This was reflected in discussions with participants in the FGDs for the current project many of whom spoke about the extreme violence that they faced during their work, their inability to work without drugs and/or alcohol, the need they felt for counselling as well as the issues they were facing with their physical health including HIV, pneumonia and exhaustion.

Education, Training and Employment: It is widely acknowledged that a lack of job skills and education is one of the biggest challenges for sex workers who want alternative income generating opportunities. Research shows that sex workers report a lack of knowledge surrounding CV preparation and interview skills and usually don't have access to references. Many participants in the FGDs spoke about these issues. As Albertina from Johannesburg said, "where do I get a reference from — I have never had a job." Others explained that they had not got school completion certificates and that they were ashamed of not having basic literacy skills and this is where they needed help the most. Several others suggested that even if you had the skills there were no jobs available. According to Megan from Durban, "I have degrees and diplomas and I just haven't been able to get a job. The most important thing is lack of job opportunities. I know some people who don't even want to get trained because they won't get a job."

In this regard, running awareness-raising workshops with local employers, organisations and agencies and forming partnerships with local businesses may be a way forward.

What are the most important services required if a sex worker is to exit?



1

Counselling and support



2

Alternate income generation



3

Longer term involvement

2. Programmes and Interventions

South African Programmes on sex work

Our research revealed that most programmes and organisations dealing with exit in South Africa are anti-trafficking or church/faith based organisations. These organisations see all sex work as coercive and exploitative. Therefore programme delivery is within a rescue and or restoration/rehabilitation framework although they all include training and income generation components. Organisations were asked a series of questions related to transitioning out of sex work generally as well as specific programmatic questions if they ran a programme for sex workers. Below is an attempt to summarise the main findings from the interview results integrating FGD commentary where relevant.

What are the most important services required if a sex worker is to exit?

Data analysis revealed that most of the organisations perceived that critical services needed to be provided within a 'rehabilitation' framework emphasising basic needs provision (financial assistance, shelter and medical assistance) in conjunction with drug and alcohol rehabilitation and counselling before training and income generation components.

Counselling and support: Most of the respondents mentioned emotional and psychological counselling and 'healing' of the individual as critical at the early stages of exiting. One organisation explained that, in their experience, psycho-social support and mentorship are critical to exiting sex workers since, "many are in survival mode and suffer from various forms of post traumatic disorders due to their experiences." According to another respondent, "loving support and individual care is the foundational service needed — without this there is no hope."⁶³ Another respondent explained,

*"you have to take a holistic approach, mental, social, psychological. Training in skills and all is fine but there is no point if you do not heal people. Even if it is scary, the street is a comfort zone. The outside world of study and work is very scary and people have to be psychologically ready to face this."*⁶⁴



One respondent, Janine*, an ex-sex worker (who had left sex work with the assistance of a church-based programme which begins with a 'restoration camp') explained to us,

*"after being at the ten day camp — I learned that I would not lack anything and I would be okay. For me it was the psychological support — I was abused when I was young and never had a good relationship with my mum. The emotional support healed me and then I was able to transform my life. I also went back home and I was able to get support there."*⁶⁵



The importance of counselling and psychological support was also discussed during the FGDs wherein several participants did suggest that this would be necessary for them. As Joana, a transgender sex worker from Johannesburg explained,

“there are many issues that we need to confide in someone. Most of the time you don’t really cough out how you feel. Sex workers have issues that need to be dealt with by a professional. You can never tell family what most of these clients do to you and these things build up in us. And there is an emotional part of us that gets ruined and that needs to be dealt with before we can live a different life.”



During FGDs in Durban several women spoke of an exit programme that they had attended wherein they felt the counselling and coaching aspects had helped them within their lives and family relationships and they explained that they valued this component of the programme even though they had not found a way to leave sex work through it.

Alternate income generation — training and job-readiness: All the organisations acknowledge that providing vocational training that can lead to alternate income generation opportunities is very important. In addition organisations suggest that assistance with financial literacy such as saving and budgeting should also be emphasised.

Longer term involvement: Another factor emphasised was the need for continual follow-up, monitoring and mentoring. Several organisations spoke about “follow up with family and friends and circles for years after leaving”, “continued follow up on progress and additional support if needed” and “encouragement and support for many months.”

Again FGD participants reiterated this. They spoke about how they needed longer term help and support and how 2-3 months of vocational training would not be adequate for them. Participants from Durban spoke about the pitfalls of a training programme which culminated in money being given to the participants to start something of their own. However, all those who had participated (about 12 women among the two groups) said that without a mentor or help to actually sustain such an initiative they were unable to see it through. As Maria explained,



“We need someone who can analyse our individual situations — we may know what we want but not how to get it. It is also important to acknowledge that it is an addictive lifestyle — each person needs a counsellor or person who can put a step programme in place with each individual-and you would have goals and know what you have to work towards.”

They suggested that an alternate strategy would be providing equipment or infrastructure and also forming collectives of women all doing the same small business so that they had support and encouragement from their peers.

“If a sex worker is not ready to exit, all initiatives will fail”

What elements may determine success or failure in exit programmes?

Analysis of KI responses showed that organisations believe in an individualised and non-judgmental approach. Further, as mentioned above, a mentorship model might be key to the success of a transition programme. As one respondent explained, “an individualised approach that centres the individual exiting sex work, where establishing trust is key and a safe space is created. Addressing individual needs such as addictions is key at the outset and effective mentorship models with vocational training are also needed.” Other factors that were suggested as being most important:

- personal conviction and readiness on the part of the individual
- long term support — appointing mentors for when a programme finishes so that the person does not feel alone
- hearing the beneficiaries’ voices and encouraging them to take ownership of their decisions and dreams
- establishing trust, following the individual’s pace and not turning them away when they face obstacles
- holistic support structures in place including financial help, shelter and counselling

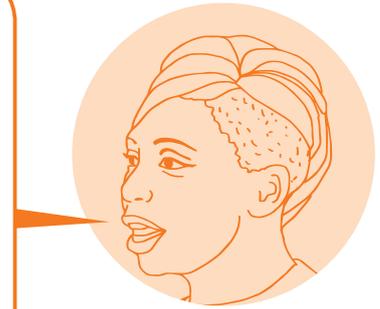
Recurrent themes were apparent in a related question regarding whether KIs felt there were *individual* prerequisites that were necessary for successful exit. Respondents suggested that specific prerequisites included:

- work on drug rehabilitation
- work on inner strength and healing to increase self-esteem and feel valued
- “a determined choice to exit the lifestyle; actively seeking and taking steps for her new life.”
- “they need to escape from the victim mentality. They must also decide to change and not wait for the prince on the white horse.”
- learning to manage money

To explain why programmes may fail, KIs also emphasise individual readiness or lack thereof to a large extent. As one respondent put it, “If a sex worker is not ready to exit, all initiatives will fail.” However, it should be noted that this readiness can be facilitated through a structurally sound programme.

One respondent explained how this could work,

“some [sex workers] are in our programme and still in the sex industry. We never push them to leave, they usually do this when they are ready. If pushed too soon the finances become the focus and problem and they get resentful and see you as the ‘rescuer’ instead of being empowered. Some of our ladies who have exited have had a bad financial month or experience a relapse in addiction and then feel regret/guilt and a sense of anger towards themselves. We never judge and we try bring them out of that judgement/stigma and be realistic about the fact that it takes time to not be fearful when there is no money and we try to help them plan ahead financially for hard months.”



Others suggested that the lack of a proper rehabilitation stage (counselling, substance abuse rehabilitation, comprehensive medical and psychological treatment) before skills development would cause “the success rate of exiting to drop severely.” KIs also identified the lack of trust in relationships, past experiences of betrayal and an inability to see a way out as factors. One respondent explained, “I believe that they experience such trauma in the lifestyle that some just never recover from it. They give up hope. They don’t believe there is a better life for them.”

What are we good at? Career development and transferable skills

Examining transferable skills is a necessary part of the process for anyone thinking of career development/transition to another job. However, this rarely seems to be part of the discussion for exiting sex workers wherein the assumption of “I am not qualified for anything other than sex work” seems to prevail both among service providers and sex workers themselves. Indeed, existing research reveals that

“all too often sex work is regarded as a low qualifications job in which workers do not obtain any skills at all. This does not reflect the daily reality of many sex workers who use their skills to do their work the best they can and acquire skills along the way that might also prove useful outside of the sex sector.”⁶⁷

During the FGDs we had several discussions on skills that sex workers feel they have developed through their careers and aspirations that they have for themselves in terms of the type of work they might want to do should they leave sex work.

Specific skill areas that were mentioned by participants in all the FGDs included:

- counselling and listening skills
- negotiation and time management skills
- communication skills
- financial skills and marketing themselves
- patience and empathy with varied types of people
- grooming, makeup and hairstyling

What are we good at?

- counselling & caregiving



- working in the food industry



- salon & beautician



- working in an organisation that supports sex workers



Of course all sex workers would not have the same skills and some skill development depends on the type of sex work (street vs high level escort for example) and the individual's life situation. Nevertheless, studies from other countries reveal similar findings in terms of skill areas among sex workers and also suggest that additional skills might include property management, human resources management and knowledge of the law.⁶⁸

Activists on sex workers' rights have explained that "if sex work is more accepted in society, it will also be easier for sex workers to get out, because they won't have to hide their past and can openly use the skills obtained in sex work."⁶⁹ Clearly stigmatisation of sex work hinders improvement of labour rights for sex workers and this is something programmes need to address.

During our FGDs we also asked participants what their career aspirations or 'ideal job' would be. The most common responses were:

- counselling, caregiving, running a crèche or social work with children or other sex workers
- working in the food industry as a chef, pastry chef or having their own small food/catering business
- massage parlor, salon, beautician
- peer educator/working in an organisation that supports sex workers

Other

- flight attendant
- lawyer (fighting for sex workers rights)
- police person (liaising between police and marginalised groups)
- IT and computers
- music producer
- soldier
- motivational speaker
- running a spasa shop
- have a shop selling car parts

An observation from the national research as well as from studies in other countries is that many programmes are designed around providing very basic skills related to sewing or craft and jewellery making that sex workers do not enjoy and do not feel that they can do well. In addition this work may bring in a fraction of what the individual is used to earning and therefore, at best, can be looked at as supplementary income. Although resource constraints limit the options being provided in terms of vocational training within existing programmes, perhaps a more customised approach (wherein

skills and interests of participants are recognised) might be useful. Considering how many sex workers talk about counselling, coaching and social work as a desired option, perhaps more courses providing certification in these areas would be useful? Other useful linkages could be with HIV programmes — whilst a few of the sex workers in FGDs mentioned wanting to work as peer educators within these programmes, the lack of money and ‘voluntary’ status was a problem.

Recognising and certifying skills!

The Australian sex workers’ organisation Scarlet Alliance in developed a training project to recognize the skills that sex workers develop as peer educators - whereby they can achieve a Diploma of Community Education after undertaking a peer assessment process. The competencies have been grouped into five ‘work function areas’ that relate to the many tasks carried out by Sex Worker Peer Educators. These work functions areas include: Communication, Community Development, Project Management, Public and Community Education and Working with sex workers. The diploma will allow peer educators to go into other forms of community work if they wish to do so.

(From Move Forward)

V: RECOMMENDATIONS

Restaurant Ashodaya

The sex workers organisation Ashodaya Samithi ('Dawn of Hope') has established its own restaurant, run by sex workers. With a grant from the World Bank the innovative small-scale business provides income for both the organisation and the workers and at the same time seeks to fight the social stigma and discrimination attached to former sex workers. Profits from the restaurant further fund a hospice for those terminally ill with AIDS. And when unclaimed bodies are found in the city, it is this group that pays for the last rites.

(Ashodaya Samithi, Mysore, India)

During the course of this research, one clear realisation was that any policy or programmatic intervention advocating or supporting routes out of sex work must first and foremost address the reality of high levels of unemployment, and precarious income in society at large. This was very apparent from our conversations with the vast majority of sex workers in all the FGDs. This does not mean that resources should not be allocated to support sex workers who choose to transition out of sex work. However, it does mean that the way these programmes are delivered must account for the lack of income generating alternatives currently available and for the lived realities of sex workers lives. For instance, if an alternative way to generate income involves not being able to earn enough to support the (often extended) family, then it is not a feasible alternative. If 'training courses' require three days on site and this means three days in which a sex worker loses her earnings and can't pay the rent for her room in a brothel, leaving her homeless when she comes back, this is also a structural problem. Below are some recommendations that have arisen directly out of the research process:

- 1. Utilise new terminology:** We need new terminology. Potential options are 'transitioning' or 'career development' programmes both of which signify movement but do not connote the rigidity of a term like exit because they do not determine an end goal. Career development can also imply upskilling *within the same profession* in order to better your conditions of work, (better pay, more bargaining power, better healthcare etc.) as mentioned in recommendation 2.
- 2. Ensure unconditionality:** Programmes should be broad enough to include sex workers trying to improve their lives, qualifications, and education etc. even if they DON'T want to leave sex work at that point. This approach is relevant generally to the world of work and to many professions where people try to 'upskill'. In the context of sex work it also makes sense because research shows that people in sex work earn better if they are better educated. This also helps with strategising about finances/accounting and health. This upskilling is more likely to be undertaken if sex workers know that they can continue to work and earn during this phase.

“any policy or programmatic intervention advocating or supporting routes out of sex work must first and foremost address the reality of high levels of unemployment”

- 3. Ensure that planned changes are voluntary and paced according to the individual's needs.**
- 4. Design customised skills training:** Skills training offered needs to be customised to individuals. The early part of the process could include evaluating and analysing what participants in the programme feel they are most skilled at and best equipped to do.
- 5. Provide accessible, sensitised, non-judgemental, user-friendly** psychological support, counselling and drug rehabilitation: These services are critical especially at the start of a transition process. However, these must be provided in a non-discriminatory way. Services that offer support to sex workers in a stigmatising environment are counterproductive and damaging.
- 6. Include mentoring:** Follow up, support and mentoring should be a critical component of any programme. This will be needed for months or even years although the nature of this support will change and the intensity will reduce as time goes by. With good planning, support could be provided by peers who are experienced 'transitioners' creating a sustainable cycle of mentoring relationships.
- 7. Support collectives:** Provide equipment or infrastructure for collectives of women involved in the same small business so that they can work in a supportive space with encouragement from their peers.
- 8. Decriminalise sex work:** A significant proportion of the stigma, violence, discrimination and denial of access to critical services that sex workers face (the drivers for them to leave sex work in fact) would be addressed by decriminalisation. Many of the barriers to leaving sex work would also be alleviated by decriminalisation.

VI: SUPPORTING CHANGE

“Interventions to support transition out of sex work should be based on a process rather than an event”

A New Model To Support Sex Workers Who Want To Transition Out Of Sex Work?

This model seeks to depict what we found out during the research process in terms of prerequisites, goals or motivations and how services need to be delivered. For instance, the common idea of exit as leaving sex work for good does not match up with what sex workers told us, namely that this process is not a rigid move from one space into potentially another precarious and dangerous space but rather a more fluid journey which may include some sex work but which affords them safety, freedom, choice and self esteem.

A programme like this would need to have the following pre-requisites in place and specific guiding principles underlying delivery as depicted in the model below:



A Phased Approach

Interventions to support transition out of sex work should be based on a process rather than an event. People may transition in and out of selling sex and may revisit their motivations as they attempt to find alternatives.

Discuss motivations: what does the person want, why they want to embark on a process of transition and how do they envisage this process might look? It's important to examine motivations, and to consider their source. For instance, if shame is a significant factor it may be important to address this to achieve a sense of emotional wellbeing, to go forward without unreconciled feelings that affect the person's confidence and entitlement.

Consider skills: what skills does the individual feel they have developed through their working life and what might they like to build on? In simple terms what does the person feel that they could do well? What would they most like to do?

Consider realities: build an accurate picture of the person's current needs – how much money do they need to earn? What assistance can be drawn on?

Create linkages to services: Important services such as counselling, skills training, de-addiction and SRHR services may need to be provided. For these services to be effective they must be delivered in a user friendly, non-judgmental and respectful way. Services on your referral list must be vetted and assessed for their ability to apply a non-judgmental approach.

Set goals and write an action plan: working in gradual stages could be useful. This would include establishing timelines that are realistic and fit the demands of the person's life. For instance, stage one could involve only creating a CV or reducing dependence on substances. A later stage could involve pursuing alternative sources of income for 25 percent of the week. Consider what issues the person might be able to address while still selling sex – for instance, applying a risk assessment to address both health risk and physical safety, beginning a savings plan and implementing a budget.

Provide mentoring support: focus on providing practical and emotional support for actions that need to be taken towards the goals that have been set. A facilitated support group would be a helpful strategy for ongoing support.

Review and evaluate: review progress at regular intervals, evaluate the goals and reset or add to the action plan if required.



ANNEX 1: PROGRAMME DELIVERY

Some of the organisations that participated in the study or that were present in the seminar run exit programmes of their own, whilst others work in education and advocacy and refer sex workers to other programmes. Below we attempt to summarise the interventions as they have been communicated to us, supplemented by information from the organisation's websites.

In terms of criteria to enter a programme responses varied from 'women above the age of 18' to 'anyone at all regardless of age, gender identity or sexual orientation'. Similarly, in terms of whether participation hinged on giving up sex work, responses ranged from this being an absolute prerequisite to "some steps need to be taken" to "no need at all."

1. Iris Dignity — White River, Mpumalanga

Criteria

The participant is required to give up sex work, "When they enter, the idea is that they don't take anything from the past. We see that it is not always possible however." If they drop out of the programme and come back at a later date, they are welcomed back.

Numbers

Staff include 20 volunteers doing outreach on the streets and five core people who work with the organisation. Twenty women were part of the project in the last service year and all found alternative employment.

Activities

The programme begins with 12 days of 'restoration' camp. During this stage the participants receive support and counselling as well as spiritual guidance and bible studies (although this is not compulsory). This is followed by 4-6 months of being 'followed' or mentored by a personal coach who they meet once a week. This person tries to help them to set their own goals and work towards these goals. Whilst they are in the programme they are assisted with finding some community work, using their social grants or returning to their families so that they have support and somewhere to live if possible.

The organisation can provide referrals to computer lessons at the Nelspruit Community Forum.

How do you evaluate success?

When a participant in our programme takes responsibility for her own life and goes and looks for opportunities for herself, that is success. Or when they say they are happy, they are seeing their kids, they are more positive about their lives. When they have a life that they can be proud of and are in control we think they have been successful.

2. Domino Foundation /Red Light Anti-Human Trafficking Initiative – Durban, Kwazulu Natal

The exiting programme is a partnership between the Domino Foundation (focusing on social charity, justice and entrepreneurship) and Red Light which focuses on human trafficking and exploitation. Both organisations are faith based.

Criteria

The person must be over 18 and female. They do not need to have given up sex work but they should have take some steps towards this.

Numbers

There are four staff members working on this programme. One hundred women were part of the programme in 2016 and it is estimated that 80% finish it. Of those who leave during the programme, 90% come back at a later date to continue.

Activities

The programme runs for 12 months through 3 specific stages.

Reach out: This is the intervention stage during which “vulnerable and exploited individuals” are identified, made contact with and invited into a ‘restoration’ or ‘rehabilitation’ programme.

Restore: The women are provided with individualised rehabilitation programmes and extensive individual and group therapy including counselling and addiction therapy. The women have access to a drop in centre which provides emotional and spiritual support and where they may bring their children.

They generate income through a stipend given for involvement within vocational training courses run by and supported by field workers of the programme. According to our KI,

“our ladies receive a stipend but they ‘earn’ it in vocational training and are not seen as a ‘victim’ but rather someone who just needs some time to figure out what they want for their lives.” The vocational training takes place all over Durban. Women may also be continuing with sex work during this time to support themselves and this is acknowledged by the organisation and does not preclude continuation of the programme.

Release: The aim of the programme is “to release survivors into economic freedom and be reintegrated into society.” This becomes possible through vocational training within “tailor made courses that allow beneficiaries to leave the programme with sustainable skills, knowledge, practical tools and community support to follow sustainable employment opportunities.” The organisation also emphasises the importance of partnerships, referrals and networking which helps in terms of providing employment opportunities for beneficiaries.

How do you evaluate success?

By the number of people who attend support groups and feel loved, valued and significant.

3. S-CAPE, Cape Town, Western Cape

This organisation runs a safe home that “desires to bring holistic restoration to women coming out of human trafficking and exploitation by providing victims with physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual care.”

Criteria

The person must be a victim of human trafficking. The residents of the safe house are referred to the organisation by the HAWKS and A21.

Numbers

Five paid and 4 volunteer staff members run the programme. Fifteen survivors of trafficking were assisted in 2016. It is estimated that 98% completed the programme.

Activities

There is no specific timeline due to the uniqueness of each case, but the provision of services and support generally includes the following main components:

Shelter and Safety: Accommodation in a safe house and provision of all basic needs including food, toiletries, bedding, clothing and medical care for individuals who have been rescued. Legal needs are also addressed.

Individualised Therapeutic Programme: Based on a needs assessment, this stage of the programme provides each resident with an individualised therapeutic programme that is tailored to their specific needs. This includes short and long-term counselling, drug rehabilitation, psychiatric services, trauma debriefing and access to various support groups.

Skills Development and Empowerment: “A crucial aspect of the restoration process includes empowering and equipping each resident with skills and opportunities.”[1] There are weekly skill development workshops as well as individualised training. Residents are placed in short training courses such as Job Readiness Training, Computer Training and Barista Training. In addition, S-CAPE helps place residents in long term training courses, schools, internships or jobs.

Reintegration and Reunification: The organisation attempts to reunify residents with their families and communities if possible. This includes creating awareness around human trafficking, helping the family to understand the needs of the residents and modelling open, non-judgemental communication.

How do you evaluate success?

When a woman is out of danger of being exploited again and empowered enough to take care of herself – that is success.

The following organisations were approached as part of the research. Organisations were identified through desktop research as well as by interviewees through the process. Seven of the organisations agreed to be interviewed and their responses are reflected in the main document.

| ORGANISATION | ORGANISATION REGION | ORGANISATION FOCUS |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| Straatwerk CT | Cape Town, WC | Religious based non-profit assisting women to leave sex work and promoting transformation through finding Jesus Christ. Offer support and services for exit. |
| S-Cape | Cape Town, WC | Shelter, and step down housing, mostly for women who have been trafficked, but also sex workers. |
| Embrace Dignity | Cape Town, WC | Committed to ending prostitution through law reform, public education and by supporting people to exit |
| Family Policy Institute | Cape Town, WC | Faith based organization focused on the restoration of the family and family values. Advocates for an end to prostitution. |
| Time for Change | Johannesburg, GP | Outreach center, vocational training program and shelter. Development and rehabilitation based approach. |
| A-21 | Cape Town, WC | Anti-trafficking and anti-slavery, international organisation with offices in South Africa. Operational strategy is "reach, rescue and restore". |
| EPIC Foundation | GP | Management of projects and shelters aimed at assisting victims of violence and rape. |
| Ladies Arise | Pretoria, GP | Faith and church based assistance to 'ladies in prostitution' restoration of dignity and salvation focused. |
| Domino Foundation-Red Light | Durban, KZN | Aim is to reach out and identify sex-trafficked survivors and vulnerable groups and to refer individuals into a restoration programme, either with Red Light or network partners. Services include outreach, emotional support and counselling (including spiritual guidance,) skills building and income generation assistance |
| Asilweni Cleaning Streets | Johannesburg, GP | Drug addiction and treatment centre also working with sex workers who want drug rehab counselling and services. |
| Cherish | Johannesburg, GP | Faith based organization working with young women including those living with HIV. |
| Oasis | NC, EC, GP | Faith based, working on youth development and unemployment |
| Justice Doll | Cape Town, WC | Faith based organization focusing on job Creation and "empowering vulnerable women." |
| Open Door | Durban, KZN | Shelter, crisis and trauma centre offering counseling, shelter and support groups, anti-trafficking focusing on prevention, protection, prosecution, partnerships. |
| Stop the Traffik | Cape Town, WC | Anti-trafficking. |
| Women Arise | Johannesburg, GP | Faith based, anti-trafficking and slavery. Healing and motivation, restoration |
| Media Campaign against Human Trafficking (MeCAHT) | Cape Town, WC (Nigeria) | Faith based working with victims of trafficking and sex workers. Services include awareness, advocacy, rehabilitation, outreach, reintegration and capacity building. |
| Iris Dignity | White River, MP | Faith based working with those trapped in prostitution. Services include outreach, emotional support and counselling (including spiritual guidance), sponsorship and skills building. |
| Survivor Empowerment and Support Programme (SESP) | Cape Town, WC | Human rights approach providing support services such as counselling, CV writing, coaching. |
| Lifeline Durban | Durban, KZN | One of their projects involves outreach, support services and training, especially to young people involved in commercial sex work. |
| Tshwane Leadership Foundation | Tshwane, GP | Faith based. Offer services like shelters, events, advocacy. Not involved with exit programmes specifically. |
| Salvation Army | | Faith based focusing on multiple areas-relevant programs may be anti-trafficking and women's shelters. |

ENDNOTES

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2. SANAC, The South African National Sex Worker HIV Plan, 2016-2019, Pretoria, South Africa: 2016, pg 37.
3. Ibid, pg 37.
4. Ham, J. and Gilmour, F., 'We all have one': exit plans as a professional strategy in sex work, *Work, employment and society*, 1–16, 2016, pg. 12.
5. Other papers have addressed this debate in detail but it is worth acknowledging here that the two main sides remain the 'anti-prostitution abolitionist approach' which considers that all sex work is a gendered form of exploitation and must be abolished and the 'sex workers labour rights approach' which emphasizes that selling sex is a job and must be treated as such. Suggested reading includes : Doezeema, J. (2000), Loose women or lost women? The re-emergence of the myth of white slavery in contemporary discourses of trafficking in women, *Gender Issues*, 18(1), 23-50; Doezeema, J. (2002), Who gets to choose? Coercion, consent, and the UN trafficking protocol, *Gender Development*, 10(1), 20-27.; Weitzer, R. (2009), Sociology of sex work. *The Annual Review of Sociology*, 35, 213-234. doi:10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-120025.
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15. South African Law Reform Commission Report 107 Summary <http://www.justice.gov.za/salrc/reports/r-pr107-SXO-AdultProstitution-2017-Sum.pdf>
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17. *Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing Good Practice (WIEGO)*
18. *No One should be Oppressed: Writing about our lives and struggles*. Oxfam South Africa, May 2014
19. Ouspenski, A., *Sex Work- Transitioning, Retiring and Exiting*. Ministry of Justice British Columbia, 2014, pg. 34.
20. This model was originally suggested to describe the process people go through when trying to give up smoking and has been used extensively in drug treatment centres in the UK.
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22. Ibid. pg.5.
23. Ibid. pg.4.
24. Sanders, T. *Becoming an Ex-Sex Worker*. *Feminist Criminology*, Vol 2, Issue 1, pp. 74 – 95 (First published date: July-24-2016)
25. Ibid.
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41. Given that most existing exit programmes focus on women and the much higher proportion of women selling sex (5% men, 4% trans women and 91% women), we decided to focus this study on women. In addition we wanted to highlight the vulnerability of women working in sex work (which can be compared to women working in precarious and exploitative forms of work like care work, domestic work etc.)
42. We aimed for representivity in terms of venues of sex work, age, region of South Africa and Nationality.
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65. * Name changed Janine has remained out of sex work for five years.
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71. All names quoted in the study have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants



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